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"EnterTrainment" for Children: How Railway Companies Promote Transparency, Inclusion, and Diversity through Children's Educational Resources

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Abstract

The transport sector, facing challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental crises, has had to rethink communication strategies to restore public trust. While traditional corporate communication targets institutional and adult audiences, some companies, like the British Great Western Railway and Network Rail, have started creating educational resources aimed at children. These initiatives, which include STEM-based activities, mark a departure from conventional corporate strategies. More than just keeping children occupied, these resources shape corporate identity and disseminate Corporate Social Responsibility goals related to sustainability, diversity, and inclusion. Children, often overlooked as stakeholders, are a unique demographic group whose early experiences with transportation can influence future decisions as consumers and even as potential employees. By addressing their needs through "edutainment" (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2004), the blending of education and entertainment, railway companies show a commitment to inclusivity and educational engagement. This is in line with broader efforts to make knowledge on rail corporate communication more transparent and accessible to diverse audiences. In particular, these educational resources use verbal and visual strategies, such as colloquial language, interactive graphics and carefully designed characters (Stenglin & Djonov, 2010). This paper analyses how these strategies help railway companies establish lasting relationships with young customers, encouraging brand loyalty, enhancing transparent and inclusive communication.

Keywords: Transparency, Corporate communication, Children, Diversity, Inclusion

1. Introduction

1.1 Railway Companies and Children

The transport sector, facing dual challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating environmental crises linked to climate change, has been compelled to re-evaluate its communication strategies to instill confidence among passengers and restore trust in its services. While many transport companies have traditionally focused on institutional and adult-centric forms of corporate communication, (Note 1) a select few have embarked on a new journey by venturing into the realm of online educational resources tailored specifically for children, a customer segment often marginalized in the transportation industry.

Innovative educational games and activities have been thus developed. These initiatives, with their stated objectives of providing children access to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects but also to Literature and Geography, and/or assisting parents in keeping their children occupied at home, represent a noteworthy departure from conventional corporate communication strategies. Furthermore, children's educational resources and devoted websites serve as a highly effective channel to shape the corporate identity as corporate website addressed to adults do. As pointed out by Breeze, "[…] the corporate website is used to present the company visually to anyone who drops in. It is important to note that this is a direct form of contact**,** like the shop window, and is quite unlike the mediated contact that consumers might have with a company through the press or television, for example" (2013, p. 148).

In particular, not only do these companies want to be recognized by consumers as providers of efficient transportation services but also to be seen as pillars of progress, sustainability, and social responsibility. Therefore, their educational resources can be seen in the light of their CSR objectives, encompassing a wide spectrum of activities, focused on reducing environmental impact, fostering diversity and inclusion, and engaging with local communities.

It is understandable that such innovative products have been introduced since children, as stakeholders in the transport industry, represent a unique and often disregarded group. Their experience with transportation services at a young age can leave a lasting impression and influence future decisions as consumers and even as potential employees. As highlighted in a 2021 article from *World of Rail* on Network Rail's educational resources, "Seeking to inspire the next generation of railway engineers while providing parents with online STEM material for children, many of whom are being home-schooled during lockdown, Network Rail created an online educational series of activities." (Note 2) Therefore, stemming from an immediate necessity to maintain contact with their passengers and offer support during the COVID-19 lockdown, these materials have now become a distinct feature of some railway companies. By addressing the needs and interests of children, they demonstrate their commitment to creating an inclusive company image and an educational travel experience. This is achieved thanks to the so-called "edutainment" (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2004): education and entertainment, when harmonized, become a powerful tool for popularising knowledge to a young audience and for involving them. It extends beyond video games with

educational goals (Susi, Johannesson & Backlund, 2007) to include websites and multimedia software (Colace, De Santo & Pietrosanto, 2006).

1.2 Popularisation for Children and Educational Websites: A Way to a New Form of Transparency

The webpages and websites, aiming at providing children access to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects and/or assisting parents in keeping their children occupied at home, represent a noteworthy departure from conventional corporate communication strategies and can be framed in popularisation for children. The concept of popularising company information for children involves recontextualizing professional language for a general audience, who, in this case, has also limited cognitive and linguistic development as well as prior knowledge.

Educational websites are not a recent development in the field of education. The internet hosts various websites dedicated to children covering a wide spectrum of subjects and created by institutions, teachers, private companies, or publishing houses. They are often termed "edutainment" as they want to both educate and entertain children (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2005; Okan, 2011). Specifically, children's educational websites share common characteristics: firstly, the metaphor of education as an adventure or travel (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2004; Stenglin & Djonov, 2010); secondly, the use of informal language, narratives, and games (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2005), as well as the presence of a dual addressee since they address both children and adults (Djonov, 2008). In order to improve engagement, multimodality (which incorporates visual codes, images, sound, animation, and video) is essential. Multiple reading paths are made possible via navigation, allowing visitors to select one based on the website structure or the user's interest. From drill-and-practice exercises to sophisticated problem-solving and simulation exercises, interactivity is also an essential element that ultimately supports educational achievements (Okan, 2003, 2011; Buckingham & Scanlon, 2004).

1.3 Companies' Education Resources and Transparency in the Light of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Educational websites developed by railway companies serve as key tools for disseminating industry-related knowledge to a younger audience while embodying principles of transparency. Transparency is a complex concept that includes various dimensions, such as good governance and accountability (Ball, 2009; Clark, Ardron & Pendleton, 2015). However, its impact on public trust in a company appears to be more direct and evident (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). Transparency, defined as "the perceived quality of intentionally shared information from a sender" (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016, p. 1788), consists of three elements: disclosure, clarity, and accuracy of shared information (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016, 2021). Disclosure is conceived as "the perception that the recipient has access to relevant and necessary information" (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016, p. 1632); clarity as "the perceived level of lucidity and comprehensibility of information received from a sender" (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016, p. 1632), and accuracy as "the perception that information is precise to the extent possible given the

relationship between sender and receiver" (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016, p. 1632).

Within the context of railway companies' educational platforms, they contribute to transparency by addressing frequently ignored recipients. In general, from the companies'point of view, ensuring online accessibility show many benefits such as greater social legitimacy among stakeholders, and enhanced trust (López-Arceiz, Torres & Bellostas, 2017, 2019). By addressing a specific type of receivers who do not only lack specialized knowledge but have also limited skills, the ways information is communicated becomes even more central. Since children, as part of the transport sector's audience, may struggle with complex terminology and concepts, these websites use narratives, visual elements, animations, and interactive tools to ensure clarity and engagement, disclosing information to a group of travelers often disregarded by public corporate documents. They make information easily available and comprehensible, using elements such as layout, visuals, and other explanatory devices.

The following sections explore how railway companies' educational websites go beyond merely providing industry knowledge for promotional goals by contributing to a more inclusive and socially responsible digital educational environment.

2. Materials and Method

2.1 Run the Railway and Connecting the Railway

The first website analysed is *Young Great Westerners* (https://www.younggreatwesterners.com/pupils), an educational platform created by Great Western Railway (GWR), a British train company that operates long-distance rail services connecting the West of England and South Wales with London, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, and Somerset. As expected, the website adopts the metaphor of learning as a journey, making education an engaging and exploratory experience. Through interactive digital activities, games, and competitions, the platform offers a fun and educational way for children to enhance their skills in Literacy, Maths, Science, Geography, and Technology, while also learning more about their local environment.

The website features two main digital activities: *Run the Railway* is an interactive game, aimed at children aged 9-11, is designed to be used both at school and at home. It offers an engaging STEM and geographical experience, helping students develop key skills in Science, Technology, Maths, and Engineering, all essential for future careers in the transport sector. The game challenges players to manage the Great Western network, complete various tasks, earn points, and learn about railway operations. A central characteristic of the activity is its emphasis on career-related skills, reinforcing the importance of STEM education. On the other hand, *Storytelling Adventures* is an activity focuses on developing creative writing skills. It provides tips from famous authors, interactive storytelling challenges, and opportunities for children to craft their own stories while progressing through the game. There are two sub-sections: one for children aged 5-7 and one for children aged 7-11.

The present paper focuses on *Run the Railway*. This activity follows a "drill-and-practice" approach, where players earn points as feedback. The game presents two types of activities:

the first one is a location-based challenge in which players explore different destinations by clicking on station markers, unlocking information about cities served by GWR. By reading the five sections dedicated to each city, they accumulate bonus points while learning about geography, local attractions, and railway destinations; the second activity is a STEM-based challenge whose tasks focus on problem-solving and developing technical knowledge related to railway operations. The popularisation strategies used in these activities share similarities with children's guidebooks and informational books (Cappelli & Masi 2019) In particular, the descriptions of destinations are focused on attractions that appeal to younger audiences, such as Longleat Safari and Adventure Park in Bath. The accompanying photographs have a parallel function to those in tourist guides, capturing children's interest and directing their attention to key attractions and historical, geographical, and cultural elements of the locations.

The other game under analysis is *Connecting the Railway* is found in the webpage of Network Rail's educational resources for children (https://www.networkrail.co.uk/stories/educational-resources-for-children/), a British state-owned company responsible for managing and maintaining the railway infrastructure in Great Britain. This game implies a more complex challenge, requiring children to design a new railway line that links a town to a nearby city. Players' objective is to determine the optimal route while overcoming various obstacles. Throughout the problem-solving process, they must evaluate the impact of their decisions on the railway company, the environment, and the local community, encouraging critical thinking about sustainability and responsible planning. There are two subsections: one for children aged 6-11 and one for children aged 11-16. As it can be evinced, this activity is directly tied to broader discussions on sustainability and environmental impact.

In general, these educational resources are embedded in the company's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, integrating a diverse range of themes such as reducing environmental impact.

2.2 Methodology

The methodological framework integrates both linguistic and visual elements to examine how railway companies' educational websites engage with young audiences. The analysis is structured around three components: types of explanation, engagement markers, and visual representations, each of which provides insight into the communicative strategies employed. Firstly, the investigation is based on Calsamiglia and van Dijk's (2004, p. 372) classification of types of explanation: *definition* involves clarifying unfamiliar terms by describing their properties or functions (2004, p. 375); *denomination* or *designation*, i.e. the introduction of specialized terms, offering children the necessary vocabulary to understand railway-related concepts (2004, p. 381); *reformulation* or *paraphrase* that "establish[es] a link between old and new knowledge, where usually a new notion is introduced first, followed by an explanatory reformulation or paraphrase" (2004, p. 383); *exemplification*, that is, the inclusion of concrete examples that illustrate abstract or general concepts (2004, p. 383); *generalisation*, namely, the derivation of broader conclusions from specific cases, helping to consolidate key ideas (2004, p. 383); *analogy* or *association* (2004, p. 376), the use of

comparisons with familiar objects or experiences making abstract or technical knowledge more relatable and accessible. Secondly, the analysis draws from Hyland's (2005) work on engagement markers, which highlights the linguistic features used to establish a direct connection with the audience: *wh-questions* and Yes/No questions encourages active participation by prompting users to think critically about railway-related content; *direct address* and *colloquial language* supports a conversational tone that makes learning feel more informal and approachable; *exclamative* and *imperative forms* create enthusiasm and prompt action, often used in gamified content to encourage interaction. All these aspects have been identified as pillars of popularisation for children (see, among others, Sezzi, 2019; Bianchi, Bruti, Cappelli, & Manca, 2022).

Given the inherently multimodal nature of digital educational resources, visual elements play a crucial role in knowledge dissemination. The study adopts an analytical framework in terms of semiotic relations between the depicted characters deriving from Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), Painter, Martin & Unsworth (2013), and Elorza (2022) in order to assess the ways in which images contribute to users' engagement, inclusivity, and accessibility. Particular attention is given to ethnic and gender representation by examining the extent to which visual materials reflect diversity and inclusion, and support viewer engagement by analysing whether images directly address him/her, fostering a sense of connection and proximity, and by investigating the use of close-up or mid shots, which can create different levels of emotional involvement.

3. "Don't Just Stand There, Get on Board […]": Verbal and Visual Analysis

3.1 Types of Explanation: Run the Railway

Among the types of explanation identified by Calsamiglia & van Dijk (2004), definitions emerge as the most frequently employed strategy in *Run the Railway*. In educational materials, definitions and descriptions are often used interchangeably; however, Calsamiglia & van Dijk (2004) differentiate them by stating that definitions explain unfamiliar words, whereas descriptions explain unfamiliar things. To enhance accessibility, definitions of geographical terms are introduced by juxtaposition using brackets, as seen in the following examples:

1) It is located on England's Southwest peninsula (a body of land nearly surrounded by water) in a large bay called Mount's Bay. (Penzance)

2) The city is built around the Naddler, Ebbie, Wylye which are tributaries (river or stream that flows into a larger river or lake) to the main waterway, Hampshire Avon. (Salisbury)

3) The landscape is hilly and contains limestone gorges (valley with steep cliffs on either sides) like Avon Gorge and a coastline on the River Severy. (Bristol)

This strategy makes children understand the landscape and its physical geography by immediately clarifying technical terms within the text itself. In this way, the websites ensure that specialized knowledge is accessible. Example (2) introduces the Naddler, Ebbie, and Wylye as tributaries, but to ensure comprehension, it immediately gives a definition in

brackets presenting essential properties of the term within the sentence itself.

Instead, proper denomination is only found once. Example (4) introduces a specific term ("Bath Stone") which may be unfamiliar to the audience:

4) Most of Bath's buildings are made from a special stone called Bath Stone.

Yet, there is a form of denomination that operates differently: widely recognized place names and attractions names are introduced as to connect the educational content to popular knowledge and enhance engagement:

5) There are even some bizarre species like the curious axolote, also known as the Mexican Walking Fish! (Weymouth)

6) Blenheim Palace known as "Britain's greatest Palace". (Oxford)

7) A trip to Oxford, the "city of dreaming spires", is a truly magical experience. (Oxford)

8) […] and Swindon was known as the Railway town. (Swindon)

9) Salisbury is known as "the city in the countryside" (Salisbury)

For instance, example (7) employs this particular form of denomination by adding the well-known epithet "city of dreaming spires" to describe Oxford. This phrase, originally coined by poet Matthew Arnold, is a form of popularisation, as it connects the city to cultural and literary heritage, making it more recognizable for the audience. As a matter of fact, children can relate new information to their existing cultural references. This strategy thus serves as a method to associate the city with popular knowledge and enhance its attractiveness.

Examples (10) and (11) show the strategy of exemplification, clearly identifiable as it is introduced in both cases by "such as":

10) Hot underground springs in Bath provide unique natural resources such as mineral waters (Bath)

11) It is located on the shore of Weymouth Bay such as Radipole Lake, which runs through the centre of town. (Weymouth)

For instance, example (10) mention "mineral waters" as a specific instance of the more general concept of "unique natural resources."

These examples illustrate that the types of explanation are intertwined with the history and physical and human geography as well as with data concerning the places in which Great Western trains stop. For example, *Run the Railway* explains that:

12) Reading is a town with a population of 161,000. It started as a Saxon settlement and for centuries the wool trade was the main industry. (Reading)

13) First named 'Londinium' by the Romans over 2,000 years ago, London now has over 8 million residents! (London)

14) The Building of Salisbury Cathedral began in 1220. At 123 metres, its spire is the tallest in the UK. The Cathedral also houses the oldest working clock in the world and some of the original Magna Carta documents of 1215 – one of the most important documents in British history.

Evidently, these descriptions recall the descriptions of tourist destinations which usually underline their attractiveness, employing evaluative and emphatic language typical of tourism discourse (Gotti, 2006; Maci, 2012). Thus, these cities and their attractions are presented as "the most famous," "the most beautiful," and "the most popular", reinforcing a promotional tone while simultaneously educating the audience, as in example (15):

15) Taunton is a vibrant city surrounded by stunning scenery. (Taunton)

An interesting example (16) is the description of Swindon, the historical base of Great Western Railway. It embeds the company's identity within a broader historical and cultural context, reinforcing its relevance and legacy:

16) Swindon, once a small market town where two Roman roads crossed, was completely transformed by the arrival of the Great Western Railway so what better way to travel by train! (Swindon)

This characteristic is then strictly linked to engagement markers, such as contracted forms, exclamatives, and colloquial expressions, which make the educational content more accessible and appealing to young users. These linguistic features reduce the possibly perceived formality of the material, creating an inclusive and child-friendly learning environment:

17) Weymouth was a favourite destination of King George – he visited regularly! It's packed with exciting things to do. (Weymouth)

The engagement is facilitated through contracted forms, exclamatives, and colloquial expressions, bringing the cities descriptions closer to the users.

3.2 Run the Railway and Connecting the Railway From the Point of View of EDI (Equity, Diversity and Inclusion)

The visual and linguistic strategies employed in railway companies' educational resources demonstrate a strong commitment to the representation of gender and ethnic equality in the second digital activity entitled STEM in *Run the Railway*. It is more interactive, and users are more involved in simulation and problem-solving exercises. By clicking on the cartoon-like images of different staff members, they introduce themselves and introduce children to science or math's problems. The "speaking" characters of the company staff are a railway engineer who is a young dark-skinned woman (Priya Bhatti), a train driver who is a young white male named Jake Roberts, a customer service employee who is a middle-age white woman (Emily Hall), young dark-skinned male train guard (Jayden Anderson), and an older white male network planner whose name is Mark Davies.

Their visual representation reveals deliberate choices, ensuring gender and ethnic equality in the distribution of their jobs and through their uniform depiction but also in terms of size,

level, and attributes. They are positioned at the same height, reinforcing the idea of equal status. Indeed, their relation shows "symmetrical display of equal size participants with same spatial orientation" (Painter, Martin & Unsworth, 2013, p. 68). In so doing, characters are portrayed and compared in terms of their attributive features: the main message is that they are part of the same class or category (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 109; Elorza, 2022, p. 46), regardless of their gender or ethnic background. Additionally, direct gaze towards the viewer fosters a sense of involvement and interaction, while close and medium shots create proximity and relatability, reducing the social distance between the audience and the represented staff members: a "contact is established" between the portrayed object and the viewer because the gaze "creates a visual form of direct address. It acknowledges the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual 'you'" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 117). Children from diverse backgrounds can identify with the learning content and feel encouraged to explore railway-related STEM subjects.

A similar approach is found in the educational game *Connecting the Railway*. It is not simply aimed at introducing children to railway-related information but is also embedded in a wider effort to promote inclusivity, accessibility, and career aspiration within the transport industry. One of the key aspects highlighted is Network Rail's commitment to fostering STEM education, particularly among children aged 7 to 16. The development of this online educational material has a dual purpose: first, it provides engaging and interactive content to inspire the next generation of engineers, and second, it offers parents accessible materials particularly valuable in contexts such as homeschooling during lockdown periods but also in everyday educational settings, as *Run the Railway*. As previously observed, two subsections for children of different age ranges can be chosen as the screen of the webpage is split into two. Each subsection is represented by a "speaking" character, guiding the users: a young white female engineer wearing a helmet and a railway engineer uniform introduces children aged 7 to 11, while a dark-skinned young male engineer, dressed similarly, represents children aged 12 to 16. The visual analysis highlights specific design choices that enhance engagement and inclusivity, while conveying diversity. Within the divided screen, there is an equal representation of the two characters' depiction: again, the two figures are portrayed at the same level and have the same size with similar attributes, ensuring that no group is marginalized or underrepresented. Moreover, this approach challenges stereotypes in traditionally male-dominated STEM fields as in *Run the Railway*. The use of high address (characters looking at the viewer) for both characters create a sense of interaction and personal connection so that young audiences can see themselves as potential railway professionals. The medium close shot, which "cuts off the subject approximately at the waist", (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 124) implies small social distance, making the two engineers more approachable and, thus, reinforcing a sense of inclusion and accessibility. As Painter, Martin & Unsworth (2013, p. 68) state: "Where only the head and shoulders of the character are viewed, a sense of intimacy between viewer and character is created".

4. Conclusion

The analysis of railway companies' educational websites shows how these initiatives serve as more than just tools for STEM education; they are strategic instruments for corporate communication, transparency, and inclusivity. By involving young audiences through

interactive digital resources, railway companies effectively bridge the gap between corporate identity and public stakeholders' engagement and trust, trying to connect their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts with Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI).

Traditionally, corporate communication in the transport sector has been directed toward institutional stakeholders and adult passengers. However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, companies have expanded their audience to include children, who, despite being passive passengers, represent future consumers and potential employees in the industry. This shift in strategy is particularly evident in the development of interactive educational platforms, such as *Run the Railway* and *Connecting the Railway*, which not only introduce children to STEM subjects but also familiarise them with the railway sector in an engaging and entertaining manner.

These initiatives seem to meet corporate goals and to promote transparency. Railway companies make knowledge connected to the transport sector comprehensible, employing different types of explanations. The three functions of these products, namely, educating, and entertaining while subtly promoting railway travel, are embedded in the corporate objective of enhancing brand identity by fostering knowledge acquisition among young users.

An essential aspect of these educational initiatives that emerged from the analysis is their commitment to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). The visual representation of characters in both *Run the Railway* and *Connecting the Railway* reflects intentional design choices aimed at promoting gender and ethnic diversity in STEM professions, establishing a connection between the audience and the characters, making them relatable and approachable.

Beyond their role in STEM education and corporate branding, these educational games also promote sustainability and responsible decision-making. *Connecting the Railway*, in particular, incorporates problem-solving exercises that require players to evaluate the environmental impact of their choices. By designing a new railway line, children must consider how their decisions affect the company, the environment, and local communities, fostering critical thinking about sustainable infrastructure. Again, this meets the sustainability goals within the railway industry, where companies seek to reduce carbon emissions by promoting rail travel over other forms of transportation, encourage awareness of environmental protection through digital education, and inspire future engineers to adopt eco-friendly approaches in transport planning while making them aware of the pros and cons of certain decisions.

The findings of this study illustrate how railway companies effectively transform their role from service providers to educators and industry leaders, enhancing a socially responsible, inclusive, and future-oriented corporate identity.

As digital education continues to evolve, these interactive learning experiences set a precedent for how industries can connect with younger audiences, ensuring that the next generation of railway professionals grows up with a deep understanding of innovation, sustainability, and diversity in transport.

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Notes

Note 1. Only a limited number of studies have examined how DEI is constructed and conveyed through discourse in the transport sector; see, for example, Malavasi (2023), Nocella (2023), Turnbull (2023), Zaupa (2024).

Note 2.

https://www.world-of-railways.co.uk/news/network-rail-produces-educational-resources-for-children

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