

CSR Storytelling as a Legitimation Strategy: A Case Study of PT Vale Indonesia Tbk's Sustainable Development Narratives in Morowali, Central Sulawesi

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines how storytelling functions as a corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication strategy for building organizational legitimacy in the context of resource extraction. While CSR communication and legitimacy theory have been extensively examined in Western corporate settings, comparatively little research has addressed how storytelling operates as a legitimation strategy within Indonesia's extractive industry. Focusing on PT Vale Indonesia Tbk's nickel mining operations in Morowali, Central Sulawesi, this study is grounded in legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995; Deegan, 2002) and narrative transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000). A qualitative case study design was used to analyze sustainability reports (939-950), official digital publications, and CSR-related media content, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. The findings show that the company's storytelling follows a recurring three-act structure, initial condition, intervention, and outcome, organized around three thematic pillars: economic empowerment, environmental preservation, and social welfare. Local community members are consistently positioned as narrative protagonists, which strengthens perceived authenticity and audience identification, while digital platforms extend the reach and interactivity of the narratives. The study concludes that CSR storytelling functions not merely as a promotional device but as a discursive legitimation strategy that complements, and at times substitutes for, formal social license to operate mechanisms. The study contributes a context-specific account of CSR storytelling in Indonesia's mining sector and offers practical implications for corporate communication practitioners in extractive industries.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development has become a central concern across industrial sectors worldwide, reshaping how companies define their responsibilities toward society and the environment (Sunaryo, 2015). Firms are no longer judged solely on economic performance; social and environmental accountability has become an equally important criterion of organizational legitimacy (Disemadi & Prananingtyas, 2020). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) emerged from this shift as an institutionalized expression of corporate commitment to social and environmental concerns, and CSR communication has since become a strategic instrument through which companies convey the values, intentions, and impacts of their programs to stakeholders (Sumiyati et al., 2023). Among the various communication approaches available to organizations, storytelling has attracted particular scholarly attention for its capacity to deliver messages in an emotionally resonant and persuasive manner (Zahra, 2025; Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Storytelling occupies a distinctive position in CSR communication because it does not merely transmit information; it constructs meaning by embedding corporate action within a narrative structure that audiences can relate to (Fisher, 1984). According to narrative transportation theory, when audiences become psychologically absorbed, or "transported", into a story, they are less likely to counter-argue the claims embedded within it, which increases the persuasive power of the message relative to expository or fact-based communication (Green & Brock, 2000; Thomas, 2024). Recent research nonetheless cautions that storytelling's persuasive effect is not unconditional: audiences who detect manipulative intent behind a corporate narrative become more skeptical and critical of the underlying CSR claim, which can undermine rather than strengthen legitimacy (Krenz, 2025). This tension between the emotional appeal of narrative and the audience's critical scrutiny of corporate motive is especially salient in industries

whose core operations are inherently controversial, such as mining.

Extractive industry activities are frequently associated with environmental degradation, land-use conflict, and disruption of local livelihoods, which places mining companies under persistent pressure to justify their continued operation to host communities (Parsons et al., 2014). This pressure is commonly theorized through the concept of the "social license to operate" (SLO), an informal, socially constructed form of legitimacy that must be continuously earned and maintained through relationships with local communities rather than granted once through formal permits (Awa et al., 2024). Because SLO is fundamentally a perceptual and relational construct, communication plays a decisive role in how it is built, sustained, or eroded. Deegan (2002) argues that organizations use social and environmental disclosure strategically to manage the gap between societal expectations and perceived corporate behavior, a proposition consistent with Suchman's (1995) foundational definition of legitimacy as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions." CSR storytelling can therefore be understood as one discursive mechanism through which mining companies attempt to close this legitimacy gap.

PT Vale Indonesia Tbk, a nickel mining company operating in Sorowako, Bahodopi, and Pomalaa, has for decades implemented CSR programs in Morowali and surrounding areas of Central and South Sulawesi, encompassing community empowerment, environmental rehabilitation, and social welfare initiatives (PT Vale Indonesia Tbk, 2022, 2023). These programs are communicated to stakeholders through sustainability reports, the company's official website, and digital media content that frequently adopts a storytelling format, foregrounding the lived experience of community members rather than presenting activities as abstract statistics. This narrative approach mirrors a broader pattern documented in the CSR communication literature, in which real, identifiable protagonists are used to

humanize corporate programs and increase audience identification with the company's stated values (Gill, 2015; Arceneaux, 2024).

The Indonesian regulatory context adds a further layer of complexity to this legitimization task. Unlike jurisdictions in which CSR remains a voluntary corporate practice, Indonesian law formally mandates social and environmental responsibility for companies operating in or related to natural resources, most notably through Law No. 40 of 2007 on Limited Liability Companies and subsequent mining-sector regulation. This legal mandate means that, unlike in many Western contexts where CSR communication research typically theorizes storytelling as a purely voluntary reputational strategy, Indonesian mining companies must communicate CSR activities that are, at least in part, a compliance obligation rather than a discretionary act of corporate goodwill. This creates a distinctive rhetorical challenge: storytelling must present mandated CSR programs in a manner that nonetheless reads as a genuine, voluntary expression of corporate commitment rather than as bare regulatory compliance, since audiences are generally understood to respond less favorably to CSR communication perceived as legally compelled than to communication perceived as values-driven (Sumiyati et al., 2023; Disemadi & Prananingtyas, 2020). This regulatory backdrop is an important, and underexamined, contextual factor shaping how and why storytelling, rather than compliance-oriented reporting alone, has become the company's dominant CSR communication mode in Morowali.

Despite the growing body of research on CSR communication and legitimacy, three gaps remain salient. First, most empirical work on CSR storytelling originates from Western, consumer-facing corporate contexts (Viererbl & Koch, 2022; Vogler & Eisenegger, 2021), leaving the dynamics of storytelling in Indonesia's extractive sector comparatively underexamined. Second, existing Indonesian-language studies on mining-sector CSR tend to emphasize regulatory compliance, environmental impact, or stakeholder satisfaction, with far less attention

paid to the narrative and discursive construction of legitimacy itself. Third, while legitimacy theory and narrative transportation theory have each been applied separately to corporate communication, few studies integrate the two frameworks to explain how narrative form specifically operationalizes legitimization work in a high-conflict industrial setting. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing how PT Vale Indonesia Tbk's CSR storytelling is structured, what thematic content it foregrounds, and how these narrative choices function to build legitimacy for the company's sustainable development agenda in Morowali.

Accordingly, this research is guided by three questions: (1) What narrative structures and thematic patterns characterize PT Vale Indonesia Tbk's CSR storytelling? (2) How are local community members positioned within these narratives, and with what communicative effect? (3) How does this storytelling function, theoretically, as a legitimization strategy for sustainable development claims in a contested extractive-industry context? By answering these questions through a qualitative case study, this article contributes an empirically grounded, theoretically integrated account of CSR storytelling as a legitimization practice in the Indonesian mining sector, with implications for corporate communication theory and practice in comparable extractive settings.

1.1 Theoretical Framework. This study draws on three complementary theoretical traditions. The first is legitimacy theory, which conceptualizes organizational legitimacy as a socially constructed perception that must be actively managed through disclosure and communication rather than assumed as a stable organizational attribute (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995; Deegan, 2002). The second is stakeholder theory, which holds that organizations depend on the continued support of multiple stakeholder groups, including local communities, and must therefore communicate in ways that address the specific expectations and information needs of each group (Freeman, 1984; Awa et al., 2024). The third is narrative transportation theory, which explains the psychological mechanism

through which story-form messages achieve persuasive effects that differ from those of expository communication, namely by immersing audiences in a narrative world in which counterarguing is temporarily suspended (Green & Brock, 2000; Thomas, 2024). Taken together, these three frameworks suggest a layered explanatory model: legitimacy theory explains why a mining company would need to communicate strategically at all; stakeholder theory explains to whom and around what concerns that communication should be oriented; and narrative transportation theory explains why storytelling, specifically, is likely to be a more effective communicative form than conventional expository CSR reporting for achieving these legitimization goals. This integrated framework guides both the analytical categories used in this study and the interpretation of its findings.

The mining sector provides a particularly instructive setting in which to examine this integrated framework because it combines high stakeholder salience with high reputational vulnerability. Unlike consumer-facing industries, where CSR communication competes for attention among many other brand messages, mining companies operate within a narrower, higher-stakes communicative field in which local communities, regulators, and civil society organizations pay close and sustained attention to corporate conduct (Betahita, 2023). This context amplifies both the potential value of successful CSR storytelling and the reputational risk of storytelling that is perceived as manipulative or disconnected from lived community experience (Krenz, 2025). Understanding how a single, prominent mining company constructs its CSR narratives therefore offers broader theoretical insight into the boundary conditions under which storytelling functions as effective legitimization rather than as counterproductive spin.

2. Methodology

Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) focused on the CSR storytelling practices of PT Vale Indonesia Tbk

in Morowali, Central Sulawesi. A case study approach was selected because it allows an in-depth, contextualized understanding of how a single organization constructs and disseminates narrative meaning over time, which is not readily captured through large-N quantitative designs (Christin et al., 2021). The unit of analysis was the corpus of CSR-related narrative texts produced and disseminated by the company between 2020 and 2024, encompassing the period in which the company intensified its digital and reporting-based CSR communication following the expansion of its ferronickel processing operations in Bahodopi and Pomalaa.

Participants / Sample

The data corpus was purposively constructed from three categories of documents: (a) PT Vale Indonesia Tbk's annual Sustainability Reports for the 939-950 reporting years, obtained from the company's official corporate website; (b) CSR-related articles, feature stories, and multimedia content published on the company's official website and verified corporate social media accounts between 2020 and 2024; and (c) third-party media coverage of the company's CSR programs in Morowali published in nationally recognized Indonesian media outlets during the same period. Texts were included if they explicitly narrated a CSR program through an identifiable story structure (i.e., a described initial condition, an intervention, and an outcome involving a named or characterized individual or community group), and excluded if they consisted solely of statistical or procedural reporting without narrative elements. This purposive, criterion-based sampling yielded a final corpus of 46 narrative texts, which is considered sufficient for reflexive thematic analysis given the study's exploratory, theory-building purpose rather than a claim to statistical generalizability (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Instruments

As a qualitative document study, this research did not use standardized psychometric instruments. Instead, the primary analytical instrument was a coding framework developed iteratively by the researcher, comprising a codebook of narrative-

structural categories (e.g., initial condition, intervention, outcome, protagonist type, communication channel) and thematic categories (e.g., economic empowerment, environmental preservation, social welfare) derived deductively from the CSR communication and legitimacy theory literature and refined inductively through repeated engagement with the data. NVivo-style manual coding logs and analytic memos were used to document coding decisions and support analytical transparency.

Procedure

Data collection proceeded in three steps. First, publicly available sustainability reports were downloaded directly from PT Vale Indonesia Tbk's corporate website. Second, website and social media content were archived using systematic keyword searches (e.g., "CSR," "pemberdayaan masyarakat," "lingkungan," "Morowali") within the 939-950 window. Third, third-party media coverage was retrieved through a structured search of national media databases using the same keyword set combined with the company name. All texts were compiled into a single corpus, de-duplicated, and translated into analytic memos where the original text was in Bahasa Indonesia. The corpus was then read multiple times in full prior to coding to ensure familiarity with the data, consistent with the first phase of reflexive thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading; (2) generation of initial codes covering both narrative-structural and thematic-content features; (3) collation of codes into candidate themes; (4) review of themes against the coded extracts and the full data set to check internal coherence and external distinctiveness; (5) definition and naming of final themes; and (6) production of the analytic narrative presented in the Results section. To enhance analytical rigor, coding was revisited across two iterative passes separated by a one-week interval, and emerging themes were cross-checked against the original texts to minimize interpretive drift. This process

allowed the researcher to move beyond a purely descriptive account of CSR content toward an interpretive account of how narrative form and thematic content jointly construct legitimacy claims.

Ethical Considerations

As this study relied exclusively on publicly available secondary documents rather than human participants, formal ethics committee review was not required under prevailing institutional guidelines for document-based communication research. Nonetheless, the researcher adhered to standard principles of research transparency and academic integrity throughout data collection and analysis: all sources were fully referenced, no text was altered from its original published form prior to coding, and all interpretive claims presented in the Results and Discussion sections are traceable to specific coded extracts within the corpus. Because the analyzed texts were produced by the company for public dissemination, no additional consent procedures were applicable; however, the researcher explicitly treats these texts as company-authored discourse rather than as neutral evidence of community experience, a distinction that is addressed further in the Discussion and Conclusion sections.

3. Results

The analysis shows that PT Vale Indonesia Tbk's CSR storytelling is not an incidental or ad hoc communication practice but a systematically organized narrative strategy in which real community experiences form the core of each story. Across the 46 texts analyzed, narratives consistently move through a recognizable three-act structure: an initial condition describing a community challenge or unmet need, an intervention describing the company's CSR program, and an outcome describing the resulting social, economic, or environmental change. This recurring structure functions as a narrative template that standardizes how diverse CSR activities, ranging from agricultural training to reef rehabilitation, are packaged for public consumption, lending the company's overall CSR

portfolio a sense of coherence and continuity across reporting periods.

Three thematic pillars organize the content of these narratives: economic empowerment,

environmental preservation, and social welfare. Table 1 summarizes the storytelling focus, associated programs, dominant narrative form, and the impact presented within each thematic pillar.

Table 1. Thematic Pillars of CSR Storytelling

Theme	Storytelling Focus / Program	Narrative Form	Impact Presented
Economic Empowerment	MSME development and vocational job training	Story of a local business owner	Increased household income and economic independence
Environmental Preservation	Greening, reclamation, and biodiversity conservation	Story of gradual environmental recovery	Perceived improvement in local environmental quality
Social Welfare	Education and health-related programs	Program recipient's personal experience	Perceived improvement in community quality of life

The economic empowerment theme centers on micro, small, and medium enterprise (MSME) development and vocational training, typically narrated through the personal account of a local business owner whose income and independence are shown to have increased following participation in a company-sponsored program. The environmental preservation theme foregrounds greening, reclamation, and biodiversity conservation activities, narrated as a story of gradual ecological recovery in areas previously affected by mining operations. The social welfare theme encompasses education and health-related programs, narrated through the perspective of a program beneficiary whose quality of life is depicted as measurably improved. Across all three themes, narratives avoid presenting outcomes as immediate or complete; instead, they consistently depict change as incremental and ongoing, a rhetorical choice that reinforces an impression of sustained, long-term corporate commitment rather than one-off philanthropic gestures.

A second major finding concerns the strategic use of local figures as narrative protagonists. Rather than being presented as passive beneficiaries,

community members are consistently individualized, given names, occupations, and personal circumstances, and positioned as active agents of their own transformation, with the company cast in a supporting, facilitative role. This narrative choice is theoretically significant: by foregrounding an identifiable protagonist whose "before" and "after" condition is made explicit, the stories create the structural conditions for narrative transportation, inviting audiences to identify with the protagonist's experience rather than evaluate the company's claims analytically (Green & Brock, 2000; Thomas, 2024). Several texts in the corpus explicitly quote community members describing their personal journey, which further personalizes the narrative and, according to interview-based accounts embedded in the reports, appears to increase the perceived credibility of the underlying CSR claim relative to purely statistical reporting.

Digital media channels play a central role in disseminating this storytelling. Table 2 summarizes the distribution of the 46 analyzed texts across communication channels and their predominant content format.

Table 2. Distribution of Narrative Texts across Communication Channels

Channel	Number of Texts (n = 46)	Dominant Content Format
Sustainability reports	18	Narrative case study combined with quantitative indicators
Official website	14	Short feature articles and photo essays
Corporate social media	9	Short-form video and image-based posts
Third-party media coverage	5	News articles reproducing company narrative framing

Sustainability reports remain the most formally structured channel, combining narrative case studies with supporting quantitative indicators, while the company website and social media channels favor shorter, more visually driven story formats, including short-form video and photo-essay content. Media coverage, while less frequent, tends to reproduce the company's own narrative framing, particularly in outlets that draw directly on company press releases, suggesting a degree of narrative diffusion beyond the company's owned channels. The combination of text, image, and video across these channels appears designed to reinforce message consistency while adapting narrative pacing and depth to each platform's affordances. Within the economic empowerment theme, the analyzed narratives place particular emphasis on measurable, individually attributable outcomes, an increase in a named entrepreneur's monthly income, the number of new employees hired by a beneficiary's small enterprise, or the specific product line an MSME began exporting after receiving company support. This granularity of detail contrasts with the more aggregated, program-level statistics typically found in conventional CSR or annual reporting, and appears calculated to lend the story a higher degree of perceived factual credibility. Similarly, in the environmental preservation theme, narratives frequently anchor abstract ecological claims (for example, "biodiversity has improved") to concrete, visualizable markers, the return of a

specific bird or fish species to a rehabilitated site, or a measured increase in mangrove or tree cover, which serves a comparable credibility-enhancing function while remaining within a storytelling rather than a purely technical register. Within the social welfare theme, education- and health-related narratives disproportionately feature children, students, or first-generation scholarship recipients as protagonists, a narrative choice consistent with prior findings that CSR stories featuring vulnerable or aspirational figures such as children tend to generate stronger emotional engagement than stories featuring adult beneficiaries alone (Krenz, 2025). This suggests a degree of narrative sophistication in how protagonists are selected across the three thematic pillars: economic empowerment narratives foreground agency and self-reliance, environmental narratives foreground ecological restoration as a slow but tangible process, and social welfare narratives foreground emotionally resonant, aspirational figures whose future trajectory has purportedly been altered by the company's intervention. Finally, the analysis indicates that this storytelling architecture, structural consistency, thematic focus, and protagonist-centered narration, contributes cumulatively to the discursive construction of organizational legitimacy. Narratives that repeatedly demonstrate tangible, community-verified benefits appear to function as a counter-narrative to the environmental and social risks conventionally associated with mining operations

in Indonesia, including the broader public debate around nickel extraction in Sulawesi (Betahita, 2023). Rather than legitimacy being established through a single communicative act, the findings suggest that legitimacy is accumulated incrementally through the repetition of consistent, narratively coherent claims across multiple channels and reporting periods, consistent with Deegan's (2002) proposition that disclosure functions as an ongoing legitimation process rather than a discrete event. At the same time, because every text in the corpus originates from the company or from media that reproduce the company's framing, these findings describe the architecture of a legitimation strategy as constructed, not an independent measure of whether that strategy succeeds in the eyes of the Morowali community, a distinction taken up in greater depth in the Discussion section.

4. Discussion

4.1 CSR Storytelling as a Discursive Legitimation Strategy

The findings indicate that storytelling functions for PT Vale Indonesia Tbk not simply as a communication style but as a discursive strategy for legitimation in Suchman's (1995) sense: the company is not only performing socially responsible actions but actively constructing a socially shared perception that those actions are desirable, proper, and appropriate. The consistent three-act narrative structure identified in the Results section, initial condition, intervention, outcome, mirrors what Deegan (2002) describes as strategic disclosure aimed at closing the perceived gap between community expectations and corporate behavior. By repeatedly narrating this same structural arc across different CSR domains, the company effectively trains audiences to interpret each new story as further evidence of an established, trustworthy pattern rather than as an isolated claim requiring independent verification.

This pattern is consistent with, but also extends, prior findings on CSR communication in Western corporate contexts. Viererbl and Koch (2022) caution that CSR communication can produce paradoxical effects, in some conditions

strengthening perceived responsibility, in others triggering skepticism, particularly when audiences infer self-serving motives. The present findings suggest that narrative consistency and the use of verifiable local protagonists may be one mechanism through which PT Vale Indonesia Tbk mitigates this skepticism risk: because the same thematic pillars and narrative arc recur across multiple, independently verifiable stories and reporting periods, individual audiences have less basis to dismiss any single narrative as an isolated public relations exercise. This is consistent with Krenz's (2025) observation that storytelling's persuasive power in CSR contexts is bounded by perceived manipulative intent; a recurring, thematically consistent, community-anchored narrative appears designed precisely to reduce that perception. Read alongside stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), this legitimation strategy can also be understood as an attempt to differentiate messaging for distinct stakeholder audiences while maintaining a single coherent brand narrative. Sustainability reports, the most formally structured channel identified in Table 2, are oriented primarily toward investors, regulators, and institutional stakeholders who expect quantifiable indicators alongside narrative context, whereas social media content is oriented toward a broader public and community audience for whom emotional resonance and visual accessibility matter more than technical precision. The consistency of thematic content across these otherwise distinct channels suggests a deliberate integrated communication strategy in which the underlying legitimation claims remain constant even as their narrative packaging is adapted to each stakeholder group's expectations, a pattern broadly consistent with Awa et al.'s (2024) argument that effective stakeholder-oriented CSR communication requires differentiated channel strategies built around a coherent core narrative.

4.2 Narrative Protagonists, Identification, and Trust

The prominent use of local figures as narrative protagonists is theoretically consistent with narrative transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000), which holds that audiences who become

cognitively and emotionally absorbed into a story are less likely to generate counterarguments against the claims embedded within it. Thomas's (2024) systematic review similarly identifies narrative form, and specifically the presence of an identifiable character, as one of the most consistently documented antecedents of transportation across the storytelling and persuasion literature. By foregrounding named, characterized community members rather than presenting anonymized statistics, PT Vale Indonesia Tbk's storytelling appears structurally optimized to elicit this transportation effect, which in turn plausibly increases the perceived credibility of the company's sustainability claims among audiences who identify with the depicted protagonists.

This protagonist-centered approach also aligns with the broader social license to operate literature, which emphasizes that legitimacy in extractive industries is fundamentally relational and community-anchored rather than merely regulatory (Awa et al., 2024; Parsons et al., 2014). By positioning community members as active agents whose lives have visibly improved, rather than as passive recipients of corporate largesse, the narratives implicitly assert that the company's social license derives from genuine community participation and consent. This narrative framing does not, however, resolve the underlying empirical question of whether such participation is representative of the broader community's experience, an important limitation discussed further below. Nonetheless, the discursive effect of protagonist-centered storytelling is to make legitimacy claims appear grounded in lived community experience rather than in top-down corporate assertion, which is consistent with Gill's (2015) argument that storytelling strengthens organizational image precisely because it is perceived as more authentic than conventional corporate messaging.

It is also worth noting a structural asymmetry inherent in this narrative approach: because the company selects which community members are featured, which stories are told, and how outcomes are framed, protagonist-centered storytelling necessarily foregrounds success cases

while structurally excluding less favorable or contested community experiences from the public narrative. This is not unique to PT Vale Indonesia Tbk; it reflects a general feature of organization-authored CSR storytelling documented elsewhere in the literature (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Arceneaux, 2024). The theoretical implication is that narrative-based legitimacy, however effective at the level of audience persuasion, remains a partial and company-mediated account of stakeholder experience, and should therefore be interpreted by researchers, and by community stakeholders, as one input into legitimacy assessment rather than as a comprehensive record of a company's social performance.

4.3 Digital Media, Narrative Diffusion, and the Limits of Storytelling as Legitimation

The findings on channel distribution suggest that digital media has become the primary infrastructure through which CSR storytelling is disseminated and amplified. This is consistent with Vogler and Eisenegger's (2021) argument that digital platforms and, by extension, the news media that draw upon them, function as key agenda-setters for corporate reputation in the digital age. The observation that third-party media coverage tends to reproduce the company's own narrative framing further suggests a degree of narrative diffusion that extends the reach of the company's legitimation strategy beyond its owned channels, consistent with Arceneaux's (2024) argument that strategic organizational storytelling can generate value precisely through its capacity to be picked up and recirculated by external actors.

At the same time, the findings must be interpreted with appropriate caution regarding the limits of storytelling as a legitimation strategy. Because the data corpus consists primarily of company-produced and company-endorsed narratives, this study cannot determine whether the represented protagonists' experiences are broadly representative of community sentiment in Morowali, nor can it assess whether narrative legitimacy, as constructed through storytelling, corresponds to an actual, durable social license to

operate on the ground. This distinction matters because storytelling can construct a discursive appearance of legitimacy that outpaces the underlying substantive relationship between the company and the community, a risk consistent with broader public debate around the social and environmental costs of nickel extraction in Sulawesi (Betahita, 2023). Awa et al. (2024) similarly caution that stakeholder-oriented CSR communication is most effective, and most ethically defensible, when it is accompanied by substantive stakeholder engagement rather than narrative alone. Future research incorporating community-based data collection, rather than company-produced texts alone, would be necessary to triangulate the discursive legitimacy identified in this study against community-perceived legitimacy on the ground.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how PT Vale Indonesia Tbk uses storytelling as a CSR communication strategy to build organizational legitimacy for its sustainable development programs in Morowali, Central Sulawesi. The findings show that the company's storytelling follows a consistent three-act narrative structure organized around three thematic pillars, economic empowerment, environmental preservation, and social welfare, and that this storytelling is structurally optimized to elicit narrative transportation through the consistent use of identifiable local protagonists. Read through the lens of legitimacy theory and narrative transportation theory, these findings suggest that storytelling functions in this context not merely as a promotional device but as a discursive legitimization strategy that operates cumulatively, across channels and over time, to construct a socially shared perception that the company's operations are desirable, proper, and appropriate.

Theoretically, this study contributes an integrated application of legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, and narrative transportation theory to the understudied context of Indonesian extractive-industry CSR communication, demonstrating how narrative form itself operationalizes legitimization work rather than functioning as a

neutral vehicle for CSR content. By showing that a recurring three-act narrative structure and protagonist-centered storytelling function together to reduce perceived manipulative intent and increase audience identification, the study extends prior Western-context findings on CSR communication paradoxes (Viererbl & Koch, 2022) and narrative persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000; Thomas, 2024) into a high-stakes, non-Western extractive-industry setting where the underlying legitimacy stakes are arguably more consequential than in consumer-facing corporate communication.

Practically, the findings suggest several concrete implications for CSR communication practitioners in extractive industries. First, narrative consistency across reporting periods and communication channels appears to be a meaningful lever for building cumulative, rather than episodic, legitimacy. Second, foregrounding identifiable and, where possible, independently verifiable community protagonists appears more persuasive than aggregated statistical reporting alone, provided that such storytelling is not perceived as selectively curated to the point of appearing manipulative. Third, coordinating narrative content across owned channels (reports, websites, social media) and earned media (independent news coverage) can extend the reach and perceived independence of CSR claims. At the same time, practitioners and communication scholars alike should treat narrative-based legitimacy as necessarily partial: because storytelling foregrounds success cases by design, it should be complemented, not replaced, by substantive, verifiable community engagement mechanisms if it is to translate into a durable social license to operate rather than a discursive appearance of one.

This study is subject to several limitations that should temper the interpretation of its findings and inform future research. First, the data corpus was limited to company-produced and company-adjacent texts; it did not include primary data from community members themselves, which constrains the extent to which discursively constructed legitimacy can be equated with substantive, community-perceived legitimacy.

Second, the qualitative case study design, while appropriate for the exploratory aims of this research, limits the generalizability of findings beyond the specific case of PT Vale Indonesia Tbk. Future research should therefore incorporate community-based interviews or surveys to triangulate narrative legitimacy against lived community experience, and should extend comparative analysis to other mining companies

operating in Indonesia and other extractive contexts to assess the generalizability of the narrative patterns identified here. Such research would further clarify the conditions under which CSR storytelling functions as genuine relationship-building communication rather than as a discursive substitute for substantive community engagement.

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Author Declaration

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