

Brand management and sustainability: Exploring potential for the transformative power of brands

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Abstract

The aim of this Special Edition of six papers is to advance our knowledge of the role that brands can adopt in meeting various objectives of sustainability. Each article advances important insights on complementary aspects of sustainability and branding which we frame around a capabilities framework that reflects the dynamic need to meet shifting societal expectations. Specifically, the papers highlight the need to critically research, understand and communicate effectively to key audiences before investing in sustainability or corporate social responsibility (CSR). Each of the papers represent one or more capabilities. The first capability represents achieving a relevant brand fit of values - whether via green environmentalism, via establishing corporate brand impressions, or through adopting types of CSR whose effectiveness might vary between luxury and mass market brands. The second capability represents acquiring sensitivity to worldview beliefs or through careful framing of CSR that can impact differentially on commitment and brand attitudes. The third capability represents alignment of stakeholder values through collaboration. Finally, we suggest future research directions of sustainable brand practices, including studies into the internal capabilities of brands and how different groups of stakeholders might interact with brands.

Keywords Sustainable brand practices, CSR, sensitivity, brand relevance, value fit, stakeholder collaboration

Introduction

Sustainability, often referred to as the new megatrend in business, has become a big concern in organisational life as companies consider how to incorporate environmental, social and cultural value creation into their mission and operations (Porter and Derry 2012). This consideration was triggered by the need for all stakeholders to work together to solve the 'wicked problems' of our time (Palakshappa and Dodds 2021). Sustainability concerns 'the dynamic, cyclical, and interdependent nature of all parts and pieces of life on earth' and finding a 'durable yet dynamic equilibrium' in ecological, social, cultural and economic terms through our response 'to the urgent planetary challenges we all face, a response that includes emerging professional opportunities' (Robertson 2014, 3). This calls for a transformational shift towards sustainable consumption and production, and marketing in general, and brand management in particular, is increasingly central to these considerations and this response. While some experts believe that branding is no longer as relevant as it once was in the face of rapid technological, market and societal change, others believe that brands continue to have a significant impact - not only on markets, but also on society today (Campbell and Price 2021). At a corporate level, stakeholders' - and especially consumers' - expect brand managers to bring about change and reconnect business and society - which is more pronounced than ever (Porter and Kramer 2011).

The changing demand for sustainable consumption and production presents both challenges and opportunities for marketing practitioners and brand managers faced with the demands of sustainable innovation and the search for sustainable brands (Nedergaard and Gyrd-Jones 2013). This applies to brands not only in terms of producing sustainable products (goods and services) and incorporating social-ecological criteria, but also in terms of

promoting sustainable lifestyles and behavioural change, including through critical reflection and transformation of existing norms (Kemper and Ballantine 2019). Brand management should have much to offer in the quest for sustainable systemic change and practice. Research that considers sustainability-related brand management from different perspectives can offer new insights and potentially innovative and creative ways to encourage and support more sustainable brand and consumption practices.

With this special issue, we want to explore the challenges and opportunities for brands and brand management in the context of current sustainability issues. The number of scientific publications dealing with the topics of 'sustainability' and 'branding' has increased rapidly in recent years. For example, the Scopus database shows that the number of published papers concerning sustainability with a branding focus was almost 100 publications in 2021. Our selection of articles in this special issue, with their interesting research explorations on sustainability topics, contribute to the growing debate on how brand managers might facilitate social and environmental aspects in their branding and promote sustainable change.

Sustainability, marketing and branding

Sustainability as a concept and orientation has been anchored in marketing for many decades. As early as the 1970s, scholars such as Drucker (1986 [1973]) and Sweeney (1972) recognised that marketing should play a broader role in sustainability by considering social and environmental issues and either seeking to prevent harm to the environment and society or to increase 'the good' for the great majority. There are different streams of research that deal with sustainability in marketing, taking different perspectives. One stream is concerned with the so-called 'business case' of sustainability and explores how integrating sustainability can have a significant impact on marketing assets. For example, researchers are interested in

how green marketing initiatives or corporate social responsibility (CSR) can influence consumer response, create competitive advantage and enhance corporate and brand value (e.g., Luo and Bhattacharya 2006; Pelozo et al. 2012; Porter and Kramer 2011). Other researchers adopt a systems perspective. They argue that dyadic interactions, activities and decisions of stakeholders at the micro level tend to aggregate into broader, societal complexities (Padela et al. 2021) and call for new, restructured perspectives on sustainable marketing (and branding) that would contribute to transformative social change (e.g., Spry et al. 2021; Varey 2010).

The role of brands and branding in sustainability

Sustainable marketing approaches based on a systems view go hand in hand with the newer definition of branding and brand management that goes beyond the managerial and unidirectional view of brand management that is internal, firm-centric and controlled by the organisation (Brodie et al. 2017). This newer perspective on branding thus surpasses the corporate urge to control and manage brands for the sake of maximising brand value, profits and building the 'business case' (ibid.). It is well captured in a definition of brands as 'semiotic marketing systems that generate value for direct and indirect participants, society, and the broader environment, through the exchange of co-created meaning' (Conejo and Wooliscroft 2015, 287). In short, brands represent a key 'vehicle of meaning that emerge from social interaction between the company and its environment' (Melewar et al. 2012, 601), with brands acting in 'conjunction with their consumers and other actors to achieve collective benefits' (Brodie et al. 2017, 188). As a result, brands have a resting potential in the understanding of stakeholders; they guide their experiences, actions and future expectations and create a context for decisions, both transactional (whether to interact or not) and

relational (whether to trust or not) (Kitchin 2005). This implies a different logic of how brand values are established and communicated. Brand values are becoming more diverse and go beyond the direct control and one-way communication of the firms to include the potential sustainability-related expectations of stakeholders (Conejo and Wooliscroft 2015).

Consequently, such a view of brand management leads to companies taking on the role of facilitators with managing brands in a way that triggers their social mechanisms (Padela et al. 2021).

In parallel with this evolution of branding to include the social impact of branding, branding research and practice have given increasing importance to sustainability and CSR (e.g., Golob and Podnar 2019; Maon et al. 2021). Although an understanding of sustainable branding has yet to mature as an academic subject, it has become a dominant concept in modern business discourse (Forudi and Palazzo 2021). There are several theoretical approaches to the study of brand sustainability, and one that has rarely been used to examine sustainability strategies from a marketing perspective (Voola et al. 2022), but seems quite appropriate, is the (dynamic) capabilities approach. It helps us to understand the social role of the brand and its importance to the marketing organisation (Brodie et al. 2017). The capabilities approach can be aligned with the principles of sustainability to promote brand sustainability learning (Kitchin 2005).

Our reading of the accepted articles for this special issue has identified several sustainability principles (Kitchin 2005) that are relevant to brand management to ensure that brands continue to have valuable (sustainable) meanings for stakeholders. We have chosen to use the sustainability related brand-learning capabilities introduced by Kitchin (2005) to interpret the core themes prevailing from the articles. We have structured the discussion of each article in this special issue in terms of these capabilities (see Figure 1) with the goal of

capturing the potential of sustainable branding and opening up questions for further investigation.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Articles in this special issue

This Special Edition of six papers responds to the challenges and opportunities for brand managers to cultivate and communicate sustainable brand practices. These six papers effectively share a dynamic capabilities framework of sustainable branding that acknowledges that brand managers have a societal role to play in exploiting valuable meanings with their stakeholders through learning capabilities. These papers reveal how brand managers can meet shifting societal expectations, cultivate closer relations, develop relevant values and encourage collaboration. The first paper, sampling German FMCGS, using a series of interviews, explores the need for brand managers to be sensitive toward consumer feelings to ensure a receptive value fit when implementing green brand extension strategies, especially those with a higher environmental involvement. The second paper shows how brand managers can achieve closer sensitivity with their customers by drawing on their worldview beliefs apart from their skeptical traits. The third paper investigates how corporate brand impressions can convey relevant, sustainable brand values, acting as mediators between perceptions of CSR activity and purchase intentions over a cross-section of business sectors. The fourth paper's focus uses experimentation of luxury brands to show how reactions toward embedded and peripheral CSR can differ between luxury and mass-market brands, highlighting the need to ensure relevant brand fit. The authors assert that more visible CSR activities might be more appropriate for appealing to a luxury client base. The fifth paper encourages collaboration by placing employees at the heart of sustainable brand

co-creation collaboration. A corporate brand's CSR philosophy is revealed through their voluntary activities that are examined longitudinally through narratives. Managerial direction reveals the tensions in achieving alignment of CSR values in the co-creation process.

And finally, the sixth paper examines how the values-based framing of CSR messages can impact differentially on consumer scepticism, commitment and brand attitudes according to different types of consumers, underlying the need to know your audience before investing in CSR.

The article *Practices of brand extensions and how consumers respond to FMCG giants' greening attempts* by Andreas Hesse, Karolin Bündgen, Saskia Claren, and Sarah Frank explores the 'green' brand extension practices of large Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) brands in Germany and how consumers interpret them. There is a noticeable growth in brand extensions that feature and proclaim sustainability credentials seeking to meet the demand for sustainable products by certain consumers as well as hoping to positively affect the brand image of the parent brand. Based on a three-stage qualitative study of branding activities and consumer perceptions of such 'green' brand extensions by FMCG brands in Germany the authors identify three specific characteristics of green brand extensions used by FMCG brands in addition to established brand extension characteristics (e.g., quality and expertise of parent brand). They show that 'green' brand extensions focus much less on the transfer from the parent brand's original concept but stress (1) general environmental benefits (e.g., reduced pollution and waste), (2) individual consumer benefits (e.g., health claims), and (3) benefits based on market trends (e.g., organic, vegan). They also evidence that these are accompanied by the extensive use of eco-labelling (internally and externally certified/validated) referring to sustainable production processes, supply chains, geographic origin, ingredients and/or recycling. These practices by larger FMCG brands tend to be met by consumers with a high level of scepticism, and their study indicates that corporate size and

a negative corporate reputation are important factors that contribute to a transfer of negative characteristics from the parent brand to its 'green' extension. They find that consumer concerns about the parent brand are more prevalent than the potential for a transfer of positive characteristics from a green brand extension to a parent brand. This general scepticism was linked to an interplay between consumers' parent brand knowledge, brand experience and their environmental involvement.

An important insight of this study is that tactical brand extensions, which feature sustainability claims and credentials without a fundamental change in the underlying business model for the entire corporation, may have a rather more limited effect on consumers in mature markets with high sustainability awareness in terms of image transfer and reputation building. On the contrary, this exploratory study suggests that a tactical and purely instrumental approach to sustainability branding can have detrimental effects triggering consumer scepticism toward the parent brand as well as the brand extension itself. In other words, sustainable branding is a strategic issue and should not be reduced to a tactical tool used for a few product lines or specific market segments only. It requires organisational agility and a willingness to change the entire value creation process of a company in a sustainable fashion so that the corporate brand and all its product brands fit the set of values that a growing number of consumers in developed markets expect. This requires a higher level of sensitivity toward market and consumer expectations that tend to increase with knowledge of and involvement with sustainability issues. More involved and knowledgeable consumers tend to be more demanding and sceptical regarding sustainability claims made by corporations.

The article *Understanding worldview beliefs to allay skepticism toward CSR advertising* by Robert Magee bridges the very well known scepticism towards corporate CSR activities to consumers' basic worldview beliefs. Understanding these worldview beliefs

becomes a precondition of CSR advertising, following the argumentation in this study. The first major result demonstrates that addressing consumers' worldview beliefs in brand CSR communication can offset the influence of their trait scepticism towards CSR driven messages. The second major result provides evidence that worldview beliefs are independent from trait skepticism, especially when influencing brand attitudes or predicting the value fit of brands. These results add significantly to the work on CSR theory and CSR communication. But not only adding to theory, this article by Magee provides guidance for management practice when shaping up CSR communication, CSR advertising and CSR activities. Considering consumers worldview beliefs from the very beginning could lead to more successful CSR advertising in specific, and, more outlooking with a general view, to brand value itself.

Petar Gidaković, Mateja Kos Koklič, Mila Zečević, and Vesna Žabkar in their article *The influence of brand sustainability on purchase intentions: the mediating role of brand impressions and brand attitudes* investigate how perceptions of corporate sustainability activities influence the formation of corporate brand impressions with a positive effect on favourable brand attitudes and purchase intentions. By adopting a micro-level perspective on brand sustainability they conducted a quantitative study of Central European consumers and their impressions of the sustainability credentials of nine corporate brands from that region operating in different industries. The survey of 441 consumers conducted with the support of a commercial market research firm reveals that the indirect positive effect of perceived brand sustainability on purchase intentions is mediated by brand impressions and attitudes towards a brand. More specifically, they show that brand impressions and attitudes are complementary mediators, which means that consumers' beliefs about a company's sustainability activities also directly affect the consumers' behavioural intentions. Brand

warmth, brand competence, and brand morality are key dimensions of consumers' brand impressions with that effect.

This article by Gidaković and colleagues makes an important contribution to the literature on brand sustainability advancing our understanding of micro-level effects and behavioural outcomes. It is noteworthy that they demonstrate not only a positive indirect effect of consumer perceived brand sustainability activities via brand impressions but also that brand impressions and brand attitudes are complementary mediators with perceived brand sustainability also having a direct effect on behavioural outcomes. Thus, the study suggests that consumers' perceived brand sustainability significantly influences purchase intentions via brand impressions and brand attitudes. The results show that companies ought to promote and communicate the sustainability of their brand supported by sustainable behaviour. This then assures a high value fit in relationships with consumers with a positive impact on the brand and its perceived relevance for consumers leading to positive behavioural outcomes too. It is important to note that corporate brands to maximise positive consumer effects and behavioural outcomes ought to communicate their sustainability efforts in conjunction with highlighting other supportive traits such as warmth (e.g., genuineness of sustainability efforts), competence (e.g., ability re sustainability efforts), and most importantly morality (e.g., value-based sustainability efforts).

In the article *Luxurious and responsible? Consumer perceptions of corporate social responsibility efforts by luxury versus mass-market brands*, author Marlene Vock raises the question of luxury brands' market sensitivity towards CSR and sustainability adoption, contributing to the sparse literature on responsible luxury. The starting point of the article is the rather contradictory finding in the current literature on the impact of CSR and sustainability on the perception of luxury brands. Two experimental studies are used to investigate how two variants of CSR practices - embedded and peripheral - influence

consumers' attitudes towards luxury brands compared to mass-market brands. The results show that CSR activities neither improve nor worsen perceptions of luxury brands, suggesting that the 'CSR-luxury paradox' found in previous studies may be a false dilemma. They also show that consumers are generally less concerned about potential quality issues when it comes to sustainable materials used by luxury brands. However, compared to mass-market brands, embedded CSR evokes significantly lower attitudes towards luxury brands - an effect driven by perceptions of image fit. It is noteworthy that peripheral CSR elicits similar results for both types of brands, suggesting that luxury brands should not forgo externally visible sustainability practices.

An important insight of this article from a brand sustainability perspective is that while sensitivity to changing contexts is extremely important for all types of brands, including those in the luxury industry, this sensitivity must be balanced with other principles of brand sustainability. In this sense, the article particularly emphasises the need for values fit and brand relevance. The findings of the studies in this article suggest that how sustainable brand values are reinforced is important - peripheral CSR and sustainable activities that are more visible to consumers seem to be a good starting point for luxury brands to begin conversations with consumers about value shaping. The results also suggest that the more visible activities, such as philanthropic actions or the introduction of recycled and sustainable materials, are the ones that luxury brands can reach out to and that are most relevant to their customers.

The Brand Manager as Practical Author. An empirical study of the co-creation of a CSR-based brand by Heidi Hansen, Astrid Jensen and Cindie Maagaard examines the role of employees in sustainable brand management, focusing on the sustainability principle of stakeholder collaboration. The article's perspective is aligned with recent approaches to brand management that place stakeholders (employees) at the centre of sustainable brand co-

creation. Drawing on data collected through a longitudinal case study, the article shows how employee volunteering activities are used to communicate the corporate brand's CSR philosophy and how employees are invited to co-create the discursive brand space. The authors use the narratives of managers and employees to also shed light on the tensions between employee co-creation of a sustainable brand and attempts to control and direct the branding process by favouring certain CSR or sustainability discourses over others.

In addition to considering the importance of the alignment of values - in this case, CSR values that come from employees' personal stories and are often transformed into brand value discourse in the process of co-creation - and the relevance of these values for corporate brand representation, this research encourages us to consider the meaning and importance of stakeholder collaboration for sustainability branding. Specifically, how this stakeholder (employee) collaboration towards sustainability can be fostered by the brand, whether and how the brand is willing to take on the role of true facilitator in the brand sustainability process, and to what extent it lets go of authoritative power and control to ensure true co-creation.

Edvin Love, Tejvir Sekhon and Tara Salinas present in their article *Do well, do good, and know your audience: The double-edged sword of values-based CSR communication* three experimental studies to show that framing CSR messages in values-based terms ('It is our duty to engage in this CSR initiative') enhances consumers' brand attitudes by increasing perceived moralization and perceived commitment to the initiative. They show that this effect is reversed for highly formalistic consumers (those motivated by the duty to follow values, principles and rules) who are opposed to the CSR initiative. This article is one of two in our special issue which focus on consumers attitudes in order to enhance the success of CSR activities (see also Magee in this issue). This is the first paper to establish the link between values-based CSR communication, perceived moralization, perceived commitment, and

brand attitudes. For the development of CSR theory this article builds on - and brings together - the research streams on CSR communication and consumer ethical systems. For management practice, the results of the studies by Edwin Love et al. (in this issue) show that values-based framing of CSR is a high-return strategy for brands in terms of improved brand attitudes. Nevertheless, and this is a relevant result, it is also a high-risk strategy for CSR managers targeting highly formalistic consumers.

Conclusions and agenda for future research

This Special Issue of the Journal of Brand Management presents the latest scholarly thinking and advances research insights on the territory. Taken together, the articles included here represent the vibrancy, diversity and plurality of sustainability and branding as a pertinent and timely research area, which has importance for branding practitioners and policy makers alike. Individually, each article advances important insights on different but overall complementary aspects of sustainability and branding. Each article enriches our understanding of the area and has relevance for scholarship and branding practice.

We have chosen to look at the articles in this Special Issue through the lens of the capabilities approach, which brings an outside-in perspective to the forefront and forces brands to be sensitive and attuned to their external environment (Voora et al. 2022). Most of the articles in this Special Issue have clearly demonstrated the importance of such sensitivity by exploring the changes in consumer expectations and demands regarding sustainability issues. Most of the articles also show an awareness that this is only the first step on the road to the future of sustainable brands. As suggested by Kitchin (2005) and based on the findings from the contributions in this Special Issue, brands need to use other brand capabilities to effectively address the pressing sustainability issues and show how these capabilities can be

used in developing sustainable brand practices. As Hanssen et al. show in this Special Issue, engaging and collaborating with stakeholders is one of the most important brand capabilities. Especially if we understand brands as institutional arrangements through which companies can best engage with sustainability (Lehner and Halliday 2014). Stakeholder engagement is key to overcoming loss of trust, lack of transparency and scepticism - issues addressed in two articles here in this issue (Hesse et al.; Love et al.) - and to connecting more closely with consumers and integrating sustainability into their everyday lives in meaningful ways (Lehner and Halliday 2014), as Gidaković et al. (in this issue) also suggest.

Although the selected articles bring many new important insights to the growing literature on sustainability and brands, there is still much to learn. We hope that this Special Issue will invite other scholars to advance the brand management literature on this very important topic with their research contributions. In our opinion, there is still much room for theoretical and empirical research on how brands can become platforms for collective efforts towards a more sustainable future.

One line of research that could be enriched is that which examines brand strategy in relation to sustainability. Here, future research could empirically explore the internal capabilities of brands and how they can be effectively used to advance sustainability. As sustainability engagement is a learning process for brands (Kitchin 2005), future research could explore how companies can use sustainability as a foundation for their brand strategy and the challenges and trade-offs involved. Further studies could explore the risks of using brands as tools for sustainability - both at the corporate and societal level. Research at the brand strategy level could explore the issues of collaboration around sustainability and, in this context, the issues of power and control to ensure the meaningful co-creation of sustainability through brands.

The second area that would benefit from more research on brands and sustainability concerns how consumers, other stakeholders and society interact with brands. In addition to focusing on different consumer responses in relation to brands and sustainability, researchers could further explore the processes of collaborative sustainable value creation as an integral part of sustainable brand management. An important question could be how the values on which sustainable brands are built are created and how they are put into practise. In this context, the views of the brand communities' and consumers on sustainability also need to be explored. This is particularly important to avoid the 'commodification' of brand sustainability discourse and to place sustainable branding at the heart of 'social production', where the co-creation and collaboration of multiple stakeholders leads to an overarching social value (Arvidsson 2008). Finally, future studies could also explore how sustainable brands can be meaningful for consumers' everyday lives and what (transformative) power they have to change the 'old' consumption practices to more sustainable ones.

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Fig 1. Sustainable brand-learning capabilities (authors' own representation based on Kitchin 2005)