

Achieving The Goal of Sustainable Brand Management: The Mediating and Complementary Roles of Brand Awareness, Brand Image, And Brand Identity

Adobi Jessica Timiyo

Abstract— This paper reviews extant literature on three brand attributes namely brand awareness, image, and identity; and their role in fostering companies' sustainability agenda. It discusses the intricacies of creating sustainable brand awareness, whilst juxtaposing the often neglected, yet controversial, pillars of sustainability. A conceptual framework, showing the three main elements of sustainability and their link to business performance, is also presented. The dual concepts of green marketing and green branding, as sustainability-driven concepts, were highlighted including some of the benefits firms enjoy from adopting sustainable business practices. While managerial challenges and implications of sustainable brand management were carefully considered, the paper did not entirely focus on issues faced by global brand managers. Nevertheless, achieving sustainable brand management requires challenging the status quo, dismantling existing models, and overhauling the culture of an organisation.

Keywords—Sustainability, brand awareness, brand identity, brand image, green marketing

I. INTRODUCTION

The recent upgrade in the digitalization of business operations using advanced techniques as broaden the concept of marketing, far more than we have ever known. Firms understanding of consumers' need, their loyalty, and dynamic interactions with specific brands, is equally being shaped. Customers continue loyalty to specific brands depends on several factors, particularly whether companies develop their brands in sustainable ways. Since the goal of brand development is to build customer loyalty [1], sustainable brand is a function of the successful interactions between business activities and customers' interpretation of sustainability.

The concept of sustainability is far reaching and cuts across social, cultural, economic, and environmental obligations [2],[3] that businesses are expected to address [4], beyond the pursuit of profit maximization. Even companies that consider themselves as providing sustainable brands only meet one-third of the intricacies surrounding sustainable brand management. Some may not be able to provide a logical definition of what it means to manage their brands sustainably. What then is a

sustainable brand? A sustainable brand is one that maintains the identity of a company's product or service to reflect its added value in line with environmental, social, and cultural issues. However, it needs to meet both current and future needs of consumers with the aid of technology, economic development, and globalization without affecting the needs of future generations [5].

Sustainable brands arouse both negative and positive emotions from customers, particularly within a social or cultural context. Positive feelings allow brands to build and develop unique bond with customers. It determines customer loyalty to certain types of brands, which is an important factor in building a strong brand. Building a strong brand comes with many challenges and long-term decisions, some of which are irreversible. Among these are choosing a sustainable brand name, developing it to connect with consumers, and reflecting social, cultural, and environmental value to the consumer [6]. The world has become a single market that is heavily crowded, thanks to technology and globalization, where nations compete for scarce resources.

Many seek to gain more consumers and acquire potential entrepreneurs from all works of life. Such crowded markets often lead to self-gratification and prejudice at the same time. Self-gratification in the sense that each party tends to seek its own interests and needs, while exhibiting prejudice towards others. For example, the notion that Paris is all about fashion and nothing else, Japan is about technology, and Switzerland accumulates wealth. Or the general notion that third world countries, particularly in Africa, are corrupt, extremely poor, and plagued with diseases and famine. Thus, the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), of the United Nations, are intended to address these imbalances.

Businesses are also at the forefront of achieving these goals in year 2030. Some, especially global brands, have gone as far as integrating sustainability initiatives [4] into their operations. A recent study [6] of the most familiar brands in the Emirates (the most comprehensive emotion-based study), investigated the familiarity and sinful relations between consumers and what they love about a brand. Results showed that Apple retained its number one position for the fifth year in a row, despite changes among consumers and their affection for other brands. Google ranked second because more than half of its customers claim they cannot live without it. Samsung took sixth place, while Microsoft took the tenth position.

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Adobi Jessica Timiyo is with the American university of Malta, Dock 1 Triq Dom Mintoff, Bormla Malta

Given that sustainability is associated with creating, maintaining, and projecting a brand to offer significant value to customers and the society at large, it has now become one of the most discussed topics in business. The importance of brand sustainability is increasing daily since consumers now buy products, whose brands reflect their values. Unfortunately, as earlier stated, some companies only meet a snippet of the requirements and definition of sustainable brands [7]. Against this backdrop, this paper leverages the role of three brand attributes—awareness, image, and identity, in pursuit of the goal of firms' sustainability. The next section discusses these three attributes but first by addressing the pillars of sustainability.

II. RELEVANT LITERATURE

Brand gives a product its unique place among competing products, whereas branding consists of all company's activities to promote interaction with consumers [8]. Research [9] suggests that loyal customers are capable of driving a brand since brands offer reliable information to educate consumers about its unique features. With respect to customers, "once a majority embraces an idea, it becomes an unstoppable force" [9, p. 79]. It means there is strong interdependency between consumers and brands. While brands tend to influence consumer behavior, the success of brands largely depends on consumers' attitudes and preferences. According to [6], once customers are convinced about a particular brand, they do not only use it, but advocate for it to be used by others as well.

Sustainability is not a new concept hence does not require one to put forward convincing arguments. On the contrary, there has been widespread discussions about the concept for decades. Some of the discussions have focused mainly on pillars of sustainability. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) came up with three elements referred to as pillars of sustainability namely economic, social, and environmental factors. It is believed these factors summarize what is needed to address "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [10, p. 153]. More than ever before, the Earth is under extreme pressure. Our air is constantly being polluted, while oceans, landfills, streams, and rivers are invaded by plastics. Hence there is a pressing need to save the Earth and preserve resources for future generations [11, p. 6].

A. Pillars of Sustainability

An aspect of sustainability that remains unclear till date is its respective elements. There is no consensus regarding the number of factors or components of sustainability. In their book 'Three pillars of sustainability: in search of conceptual origins' [12] identified three elements (see Fig. 1) of sustainability known as social, environmental, and economic elements.

Another study [13] identifies four elements as pillars of sustainability, namely social, human, economic, and environment (see Fig. 2). While the three pillars of sustainability seemed to have gained widespread recognition, as seen in the literature, the same is not true about the four

pillars of sustainability. Hence, the next section of the paper examines the four pillars discourse of sustainability.

- *Social element*: This aims to retain and sustain social capital by creating and investing in services that establish our social framework. It means protecting future generations and recognizing that our actions, do not only affect us, but the entire world as well.
- *Human element*: The aim of this element is to improve and sustain human capital in society. Investing in all spheres of peoples' life, such as education, health, nutrition, knowledge, and recreation, is a panacea for achieving human capital development.

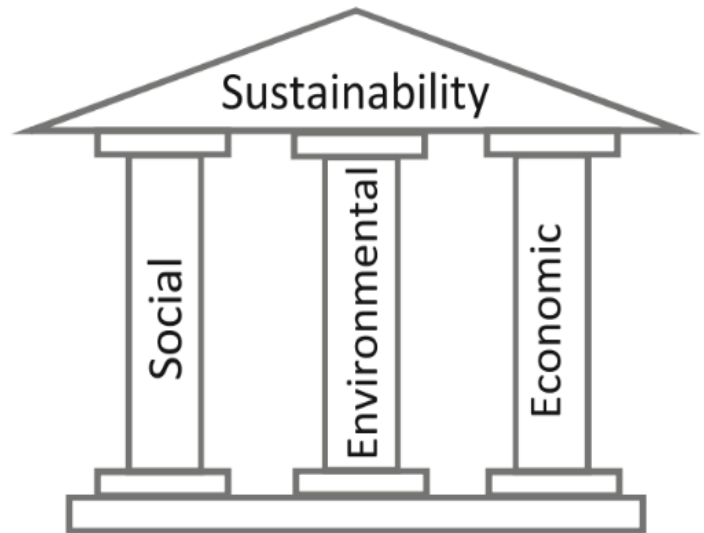


Fig. 1. Three pillars of sustainability.

Adapted from "Three pillars of sustainability: in search of conceptual origins," by B. Purvis, Y. Mao, & D. Robinson, 2019, *Sustainability Science*, 14(3), p. 682.

- *Economic element*: This refers to the efficient utilization of organisations' resources, while pursuing profit maximization objectives. Even though some sustainability approaches tend to focus mainly on ecology, systems, and interpersonal relationships among people; recognising that businesses exist to provide value profitably should not be ignored.
- *Environmental element*: The aim of this is to improve human welfare by protecting our natural capital (i.e., air, rivers, oceans, minerals, and lands). All eco-friendly programs and initiatives, that do not compromise survival of future generations, are considered as environmentally sustainable.

B. Brand Awareness

Today's rapidly evolving markets place a heavy burden on businesses, forcing them to search out new opportunities for their products. Thus, leading to the emergence of providing customers with sustainable business practices [11]. Brand awareness refers to firm's target audience knowledge of its brand. It simply describes the process of engaging with consumers' lifestyles and buying habits, so that none would think twice about buying the company's brand, or becoming a

loyal customer [6]. Therefore, the importance of brand awareness in enhancing companies' competitive position within an industry, while boosting overall profitability, cannot be overemphasized.

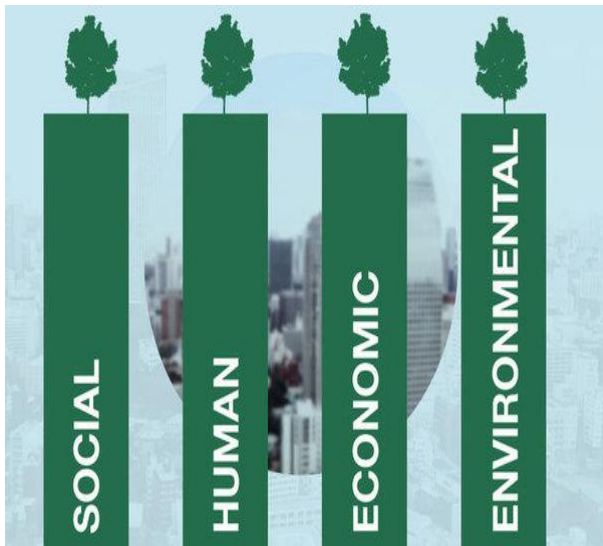


Fig. 2. Four pillars of sustainability.

Source: [14] Accessed via *Updates, Insights, and News From FutureLearn / Online Learning for You*

In highly competitive markets, brand awareness remains an invaluable tool a company can rely on to attract customers and maintain its growth within an industry [15]. The following is a summary of the importance of brand awareness to businesses:

- It helps to achieve companies' marketing objectives.
- It is an important step for promoting existing products or developing new ones.
- Products with sufficient brand awareness possibly, have wider customer reach.
- Some consumers prefer buying branded products instead of those that are unfamiliar, providing there are many options to choose from.

C. Creating Brand Awareness

To create awareness in the competitive market, some steps need to be taken. First, firms must identify the advantages of their product offering. In addition to designing impressive logos, interacting with the public, and addressing customers' complaints [5], firms must have social media presence. Presently, there is a wave of media influencers who promote brands on various social media platforms like FaceBook, YouTube or Instagram. Storytelling is another strategy used by global brands as this is considered a treasure if carefully executed. Another method of creating awareness is through storytelling. Telling real stories to target audience about a company's offering helps to create strong bonds in the minds of consumers. Such bonds are often linked to specific brands that customers find to be appealing.

D. Brand Image and Identity

Brand image is the broad impression, corporation, and thoughts that customers know about a company's brand. It is completely different from brand identity. In the sense that, brand identity refers to elements that are visible to customers like designs, logos, and colors. These elements distinguish one brand from another in the minds of consumer. The fundamental difference between brand image and identity is this; brand identity is determined by the company and shows how owners perceive the brand whereas brand image refers to external stakeholders' perception of the brand [16]. Brand identity is like one's personal ID card with logo, design, and colors, which resonates strongly with target audience.

A recent study [17] investigated the relationship between brand identity and awareness, where a conceptual model (see Fig. 3) was developed to depict the strategic role of these two attributes in fostering sustainable brands. The study suggests that building a strong brand identity needs the following steps:

- identifying target audience, competitors, and the value to be delivered
- designing appealing logos
- choosing a language appropriate for communicating the brand on social media
- responding to changes in the environment, particularly societal and cultural norms
- continuous monitoring and improvement

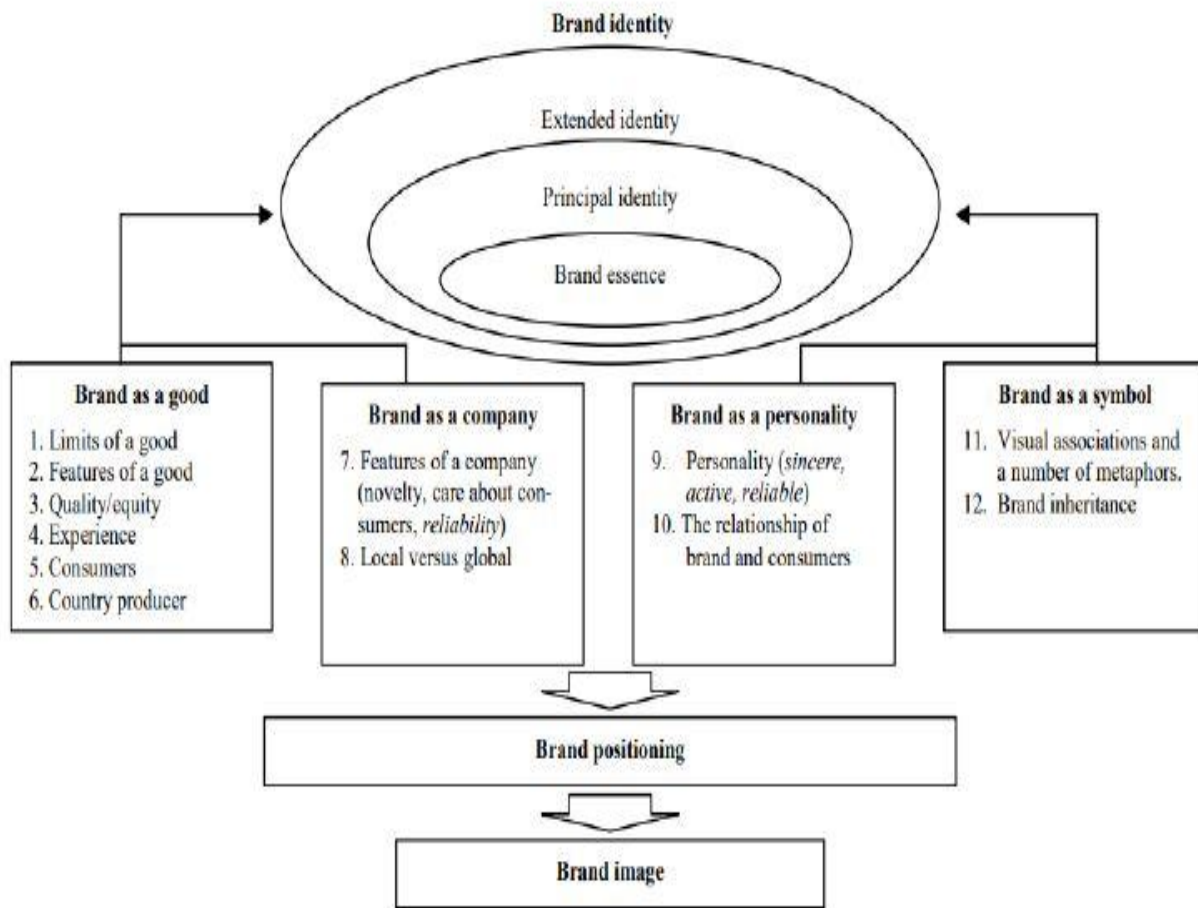


Fig. 3. Developing brand image and identity.

Source: Azarova (2022, p. 17)

III. SUSTAINABLE BRAND MANAGEMENT

A general thinking is that brand management involves marketing processes describing the nature of firms' value optimizing products and services [8]. As a branch of marketing, brand management enhances brand value to enable it to establish a dominance presence in the market. But, in recent years, brand management has taken a drastic leap as it is being viewed from an interdisciplinary perspective. Ever-changing market conditions, technological advancements, and sudden changes in the environment could have necessitated this shift in management thinking [18]. As a result, brand management generally addresses social, ethical, and environmental concerns [19] in addition to, promoting inclusivity and diversity. Thus, many firms are more committed, than ever before, in pursuit of a sustainable business agenda [9].

Traditional business practices, characterized by depletion of natural resources, describes the vicious cycle of manufacturing, marketing, consumption, and releasing toxic substances into the environment [20] is no longer acceptable. Companies must now reassess, refocus, and transition from traditional business models towards more sustainable features. With the hope that doing so will move the economy away from production and

over-consumption; to responsible production and consumption [11]. As once echoed by the CEO of Unilever, Paul Polman, businesses will fail for ignoring social issues because "with liberty comes responsibility. Sustainable brands have the heritage, ability and drive to bring this alive" [9, p. 80]. This statement captures the essence of green marketing.

A. Sustainability and Green Marketing

Green marketing describes all activities that enable marketers to promote environmental-friendly initiatives through the provision of sustainable production methods and consumption of goods and services [11]. Whereas, green branding, which emerged from within the broader field of green marketing, strongly emphasizes providing eco-friendly products and services at an affordable price to consumers [9, [21]. Both concepts are not mutually exclusive since they all advocate for businesses to engage in meaningful practices to protect the environment. Both draws parallel with the concept of sustainability as revealed by a study [9] where the authors highlighted three attributes of green marketing. These attributes are like the well-known three pillars of sustainability.

According to the authors, green marketing comprises of three distinctively attributes – ecological, equitable, and economic attributes. *Ecological* attribute attempts to minimize

negative environmental effects, from business activities, whereas the *equitable* attribute focuses on preventing unsustainable marketing practices. Such practices may include lying about product quality and performance or misrepresenting what the brand stands for so the company can garner support from the public. While the *economic* attribute appeals to firms to employ sustainable brand management in their marketing practices. Despite their similarity, there is a slight difference between green marketing and the three pillars of sustainability. The three pillars of sustainability does not only address environmental issues, but also social and economic issues [19]. Given that sustainability is quite a broad of field, cutting across many disciplines, it is vital to know its unique role in marketing. Hence, the next section addresses this issue.

B. Why Pursue Sustainable Brand Management

Sustainability has long been anchored within marketing activities. In the sense that ethical marketing practices have helped reduced harm to our society as firms continue to seek the good of many [22]. Nowadays, seeking sustainable brand management has become a common practice, particularly among Multinational Companies (MNCs). Consumers, on their part, are rooting for companies that promote sustainable practices. Many often change product preferences due to brand bandwagon. To prevent this, companies now display their sustainability initiatives for local communities to see [23]. Thus, a key advantage of pursuing sustainable brand management is increased brand awareness, particularly, for consumers willing to purchase sustainable products.

Sustainable brand management leads to compliance with the SDGs since they encourage governments, societies and businesses to flourish, but not at the expense of the planet [24]. Interestingly, the long evolution of the marketing concept, from ecological, green, to enviropreneurial (sustainable) marketing, has not redefined the essence of marketing. Instead, research [25] suggests sustainable marketing has helped align marketing theories and practices with the United Nations' SDGs. While sustainable marketing alone will not save the Earth, it gives us more time to reflect on how best to save the environment from further degradation.

A recent study [26] found the following benefits related to sustainable brand management:

- *Sustainability drives sales:* customers are becoming more knowledgeable now than ever before. They recognise the bargaining power they possess and are not afraid to use it. No wonder, they show keen interest in knowing how products are manufactured, particularly whether companies employ responsible production processes or not. Some even show solidarity to employees whose companies treat them unfairly. Therefore, companies that remain active in adopting environmental-friendly practices would likely attract more loyal customers than companies that do not.

- *The future is green:* As a broad concept, sustainability seeks much more than producing environmentally friendly products. It is futuristic, with the hope that more firms will continue to invest in eco-friendly products to create a better future for everyone. Such gestures will increase customers' patronage, while helping to boost companies' sales revenues.

- *You risk being left behind:* The study revealed that CEOs and leaders are more interested in addressing sustainability issues confronting humanity at present. Their position is based on the notion that future generations would be capable to handle future problems. Such notion, though selfish in some way, did pay off using Amazon as an example. By focusing on addressing current issues, Amazon doubled its net sales in a single year. All of these happened at the peak of Covid-19 pandemic. However, ignoring the future is a recipe for disaster.

- *Increased customer trust:* Most business transactions nowadays take place online and require less physical contact between sellers and buyers. It is possible for customers to lose interest if sellers are not readily available to answer pertinent questions. Sustainable brand image increases customers' trust, and boosts companies' credibility, particularly as companies promptly address customers' queries.

Driven by global awareness of the SDGs, customers no longer regard sustainable practices as optional, but as a need that should be addressed by firms' offering [27]. The public is no longer satisfied with firms pursuing short-term profit goals, but prefer those with sustainable agenda [9], [11]. Sustainable brands enjoy positive public image, which is capable of driving sales up and increasing a firm's share price [28]. As earlier stated (20) the adoption of sustainable brands "in sincere and planned efforts will reap better returns in the age of the informed customer" (p. 1).

Even consumption trends are in favor of companies adopting sustainable and socially responsible modes. Mainstream research [29] revealed that companies with eco-friendly brands, fair management practices, and support for local preferences, experienced far greater sales than those that did not. To recapitulate the above, the benefits of sustainable brand management, so far, include compliance with the United Nations' SDGs, improving brand equity and corporate image, enhancing customer loyalty, and competitive advantage. A summary of the processes leading to the fulfilment of these advantages is presented in Fig. 4. The figure shows key players that serve as catalysts towards the realization of the sustainability goal of firms. The advantages are broad and inclusive, thus, firms refusing to pursue a sustainable agenda are missing a lot. But what are the challenges facing those in pursuit of this agenda?

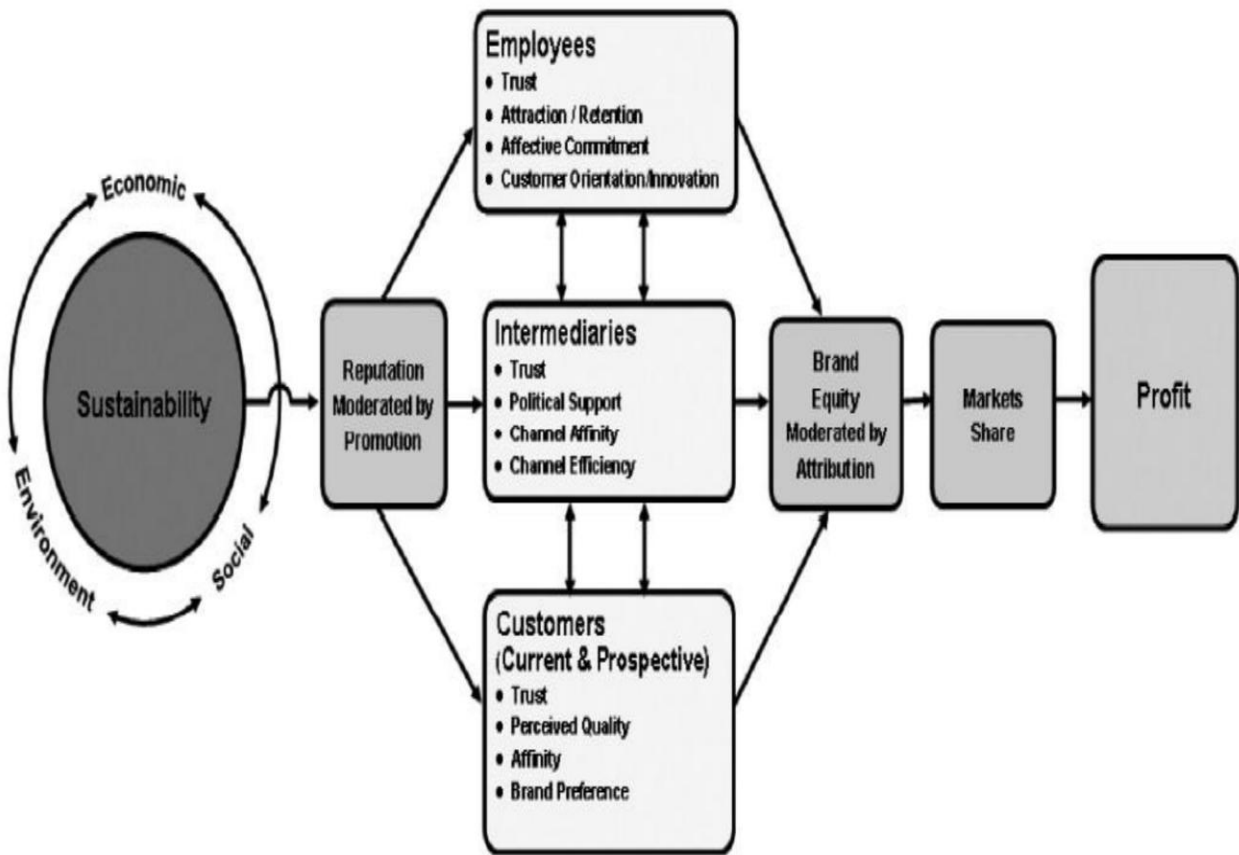


Fig. 4. The nexus between sustainability and profitability

Source: "Brand Strategies in the Era of Sustainability," by A. Grubor & O. Milovanov, 2017, *Interdisciplinary Discipline of Complex Systems*, 15(1), p. 81

C. Challenges facing sustainable brand management

Sustainable brand management is beneficial to many organisations, particularly those dealing with global brands. However, due to intense competition and changes in the business environment, firms face some challenges, particularly when managing global brands. Thus, when looking at the concept of sustainability and strategic brand management, a mixture arises between these two terms. In the sense that, a recent study [30] suggests the goal of both concepts provide guidelines for managers to successfully manage their companies, while confronting the challenges that threaten their brands. No doubt, the era of designing marketing campaigns by prints is long gone. The authors believe this has since been replaced by digital marketing, a term that is receiving a global attention, due to its innovative capability of addressing constant environmental changes.

Like digital marketing and sustainability, sustainable brand management is not free from problems. It requires substantial amount of resources, including time, money, and a great deal of effort. It can take a toll on companies' resources because it is easy for global marketing campaigns to be disrupted due to lack insufficient budget. Mostly, where shareholders prefer increased dividends to utilising excess funds for marketing campaign purposes. It is, therefore, fair to say this is where digital marketing becomes invaluable, as it can address much of a company's budgetary concerns.

Inability to measure the success of sustainable marketing practices, is another key challenge. Particularly, when assessing whether or not a firm's knowledge of sustainable entrepreneurship is succeeding. For this reason, it is crucial for companies to employ tools capable of tracking sustainability initiatives, measure performance, and present strategies through appropriate marketing techniques to the consumer [11]. Against this backdrop, it is believed that "the higher the evaluation of the impact of a given activity, the more frequent its implementation in the studied companies" [31, p. 1]. Thus, as suggested by some authors [32], in addition to measuring the performance of sustainable practices, firms must be transparent enough to disclose accurate information.

Greenwashing is another challenge that managers face when seeking sustainable brand management. Studies [33] suggest this is a deliberate act engaged by corporations, involving the misappropriation of the notion of sustainability, to deceive gullible consumers. Greenwashed customers lose trust in brands, resulting in lack of customer engagement by firms, which also affects companies' bottom-line outcomes. Next, the paper examines the implication of the above discourse to managers and other stakeholders.

IV. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

American firms are losing sales for failing to act on the on-going climate catastrophes. Research [34] has shown that one-third of American firms lost business to competitors. A

good number of them engage in some form of sustainability initiatives but, not sufficient to address the all-inclusive goal of sustainability. Thus, making sustainability the 'new normal' in all aspects of business operations, including brand management. Unfortunately, of late, the sustainability agenda has been taken over by desperate politicians to score political points. Regardless, the social and environmental contexts of sustainability remain at the forefront of these debates in the deepest sense [35]. Sustainability requires management to be intentional in implementing policies and strategies that lead towards achieving this goal in brand management [36].

The logic upon which an institution frames its sustainability agenda is shaped by many factors including their history, social beliefs, work methods, and production systems [35]. Hence, individuals equally strive to develop relative understanding of these realities to the best of their understanding [37]. Corporate logic, therefore, is a lens for assessing the various steps taken by corporations in achieving the goals of sustainability. An example can be drawn from Germany's initiatives to redefine sustainable cocoa as that produced in accordance with the nation's environmental, social, cultural, and economic requirements [38]. To this effect, its production activities are environmentally friendly and socially responsible.

The sustainable cocoa sector is an example of how nations and companies strive to achieve brand sustainability [38]–[40], while supporting the livelihood of cocoa farmers. Furthermore, sustainability defines, to a large extent, the reputation of a brand. As seen in the way some global companies engage in broader definitions of sustainability, such as sustainable packaging and recycling. This is because consumers expect sustainability in packaging as key factor in creating good brand image in the mind of consumers. Hence most global brands are proactive in pursuing a sustainable brand management.

For example, Pepsi and Nestle develop packaging envelopes that are easily recyclable and environmentally friendly. As such they somehow enjoy good brand recognition from the public. As consumer awareness of recycling practices increases, corporate investment in sustainability initiatives is also increasing, thus suggesting a positive relationship between brand awareness and increased investment in sustainability. This enhances consumers' experience of sustainable brands, and amplifies their knowledge of the existence of such brands [41], [42].

The above examples are reasons why firms should pursue sustainability in its broadest sense. By going beyond traditional product marketing towards taking conscious commercial sustainability initiatives and building these into their offerings and brands. Evaluating brand performance in an on-going basis requires firms to incorporate sustainability into broad corporate policies. This can be used as control mechanism to monitor whether a company's brand value is compatible with their business portfolio. As difficult as it seems, it is important for firms to evaluate their annual sustainability plans in an on-going basis. Most importantly, consumers' intention to purchase a brand and their connection with certain types of brands must be addressed as a joint effort, requiring the collaborations of firms, customers, and the larger society [43].

V. CONCLUSION

Sustainability is vital for businesses for a number of reasons. First, sustainable practices can help businesses reduce their operating costs and improve their bottom line. For example, energy-efficient practices have helped businesses save energy costs. Whereas water-conservation efforts have led to reduced water bills for firms that rely on heavy water utilization. As more consumers look towards patronizing environmentally and socially responsible brands, sustainable practices can help businesses attract new customers and gain the loyalty of existing ones. Finally, sustainable practices help businesses to build resilience in the face of environmental and social challenges. Investing in sustainability initiatives protects business failures and position some firms for long-term success, which must be the reason firms are enjoined to incorporate sustainability as part of their corporate culture [44].

The Johannesburg declaration on sustainable development posits that sustainability requires the commitment of everyone "to build a humane, equitable and caring global society cognizant of the need for human dignity for all" [10, p. 154]. History has proven, again and again, for us to stand together in support of fostering a better life. Even though the definition of a better life has changed in recent years, due to COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions, the quest for a better life has not changed [23]. Pursuing the better life could be approached through sustainable brand management. Within the broader field of marketing, this means acknowledging the mediating, and often complementary, roles of brand awareness, brand image, and identity on companies' sustainability agenda. However, scientific inquiry into sustainable brand management is fragmented and immature. Hence, it inhibits one's ability to make certain judgments nor draw precise legitimate inferences. It is indicative that, so far, only few multinational companies adopt sustainability as a business model. For this reason, more research is required to offer holistic and divergent views about the subject matter.

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Dr. Adobi Jessica Timiyo,
(Assistant professor,
American university of
Malta) PhD in business and
management