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## Sustainability as a Brand Power Factor in the Women's and Men's Assessment

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The authors' intention is to indicate the growing interest and importance of sustainability in the overall brand image from a strategic perspective. Identifying and assessing brand commitment to sustainability according to consumer gender is of particular interest. The assessment of brand communication methods that are socially engaged is included.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The article presents a research approach based on a literature query and empirical research. Beginning with the essence and areas for brands' involvement in sustainability, the focus was on the elements determining brand power and the conditions for building brand power in this context. The empirical research was conducted by a diagnostic survey method using a questionnaire survey on a representative sample of 1000 respondents. The test results were statistically processed using the Mann-Whitney U test.

**Findings:** The research result analysis shows differences in the significance assessment of brands' commitment to sustainability between men and women. The perception of sustainability as a brand strength element, image or business strategy also differs. The empirical material analysis additionally shows divergent assessments of men and women towards communication methods and tools of the sustainability idea as a brand attribute.

**Practical Implications:** The obtained research results allow us to formulate practical implications for brands concerning brand power elements identification, brand image shaping, and communication methods regarding commitment to sustainability in terms of consumers' gender. The conducted research can be used, in a causal perspective, as an attempt to compose a model approach to brand success factors in a strategic perspective.

**Originality/Value:** This study borrows from the existing research on market orientation, branding and brand management to argue that organizations are required to verify the real brand expectations regarding commitment and implementation of sustainability concepts. When managing a brand, organizations should strive to communicate socially relevant values and ideas for sustainability in an appropriate and consistent manner.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, brand value, power, and image, marketing communication.

**JEL codes:** M3, M30, M31, M37.

**Paper Type:** Research article.

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## **1. Introduction**

Market trends and megatrends i.e., overlapping of real and virtual worlds, cocooning and escape into privacy, social media ubiquity vis a vis digital abstinence (Frost, 2011; 2013; Tkaczyk, 2012) significantly determine the set of expectations towards brands by consumers. They also influence the brand and product perception. Against this background, the concept of sustainability as a sustainable global trend present in various areas of life acquires special significance. Customers expect brands to provide a variety of values concentrated in sets of functional, economic, aesthetic, cognitive, and social values. These are the values that product bidders are trying to deliver and are delivering. Of particular interest becomes the evaluation of the sustainability inclusion in brand attributes and the impact of this commitment on brand perceptions.

The brand commitment sustainability research was planned at the specific brand dimensions like brand power, brand image, or success factors and business element. This paper is an analysis example of consumer perceptibility of incorporating sustainability values into a brand strategy, particularly from a gender perspective. Integrating the sustainability idea into brand branding also requires a marketing message that is relevant to consumer expectations. Creating a marketing message based on properly selected tools can help build brand power.

The research purpose is to attempt to assess the brand's perception of its commitment to sustainability in the context of building its power and image. The following research questions were formulated for the purposes of the study: (1) How do consumers rate the brand commitment's significance in sustainability (2) Do consumers perceive sustainability commitment as an element of brand power? (3) Do consumers perceive sustainability commitment as part of brand branding power? (4) Are perceptions of brands' commitment to sustainability gender-specific? (5) What communication do consumers expect from brands committed to sustainability?

## **2. Brand Power and Sustainability**

Brand power is understood as the brand's market position and the strength of buyer demand for the brand compared to competing brands (Kall *et al.*, 2013). Brand power consists of awareness of how many people know the brand and how many know exactly what distinguishes it, associations and beliefs i.e., what people know or think they know about the brand and attitude i.e. emotional attitude towards the brand (Aaker, 1996). The issue concerning the factors influencing brand success is raised in the literature and in research (Pulka and Rozbicka, 2018). The Brand Asset Evaluator tool for measuring brand value assumes that four factors contribute to brand success. The first factor is differentiation. This feature assumes that each good brand can be distinguished from the others. Additionally, the brand must exhibit distinctive and unique characteristics. The second characteristic is

relevance. It means that every good brand is created for consumers and aims to meet their specific needs. The third component is esteem. This factor refers to the brand being trusted and having recognition and reputation. This is the result of the promises made. The final success factor for a brand is knowledge. It assumes that a good brand is characterised not only by the fact that it is known among consumers but also by general knowledge about it (<http>).

Sustainability is a process aimed at meeting the development goals of the present generation in a way that enables future generations to fulfil the same needs. In this context, three of its characteristics can be distinguished: self-sustainability, durability and balance (Borys, 2011). In a definitional context, sustainability is a normative concept, considering the values and ethical norms prevailing in a particular society that are necessary for its development. The current literature on sustainability provides many new interpretations, depending on the aggregation level or subject area. It can be noticed that the concept lacks a precise and consistent meaning, as evidenced by the existence of almost 300 definitions of sustainability (Johnston *et al.*, 2007). The general consensus relates to a long-term focus with an environmental, economic and social perspective. The implementation of sustainability is associated with a fundamental change in management that incorporates a systemic and integrated approach of interdisciplinary nature (Urbaniec, 2016). Sustainability is a concept that is gaining popularity as a new trend in socio-economic development around the world (Kolodko, 2014).

Sustainability opportunities (Gasiński and Pijanowski, 2011):

- cost reduction through process optimisation leading to reduced material and energy consumption in supply chains,
- increasing employees' involvement and creativity, as well as shaping the image of a reliable employer and business partner,
- the development of environmental and social innovations, both in relation to the product and its usefulness as well as to the business model - allows to distinguish in the market and to adapt to the dynamically changing customers' needs,
- exchanging experience and increasing trust between business partners, allowing for rapid identification and response to changing market expectations,
- increasing the power to influence the economic reality through responsible involvement in solving social problems.

Sustainability threats (Gasinski and Pijanowski, 2011):

- the necessity for managing more interactions between stakeholders, requiring much more effort and expense,
- low awareness among market participants regarding the meaning and value of socially responsible enterprises for society, the environment and the economy,

- low consumer purchasing power resulting in the choice of goods and services is based primarily on price rather than on the production method or the organisation's values,
- the company's high sensitivity to reputational risks or unethical activities in the supply chain,
- publicising by competitors, trade unions, consumer organisations, etc. cases of inconsistent compliance with CSR principles, and the risk of class action lawsuits by groups of individuals harmed by the company's actions,
- increased investment, lower return and sometimes longer time required to produce and distribute a product that meets high environmental and social standards (e.g., organic food).

Companies incorporate sustainability principles in building effective competitive strategies for their long-term growth. In the case of sustainability, enterprises can identify specific, unique ecological competitive instruments, which include (Gasinski and Pijanowski, 2011):

- ecological quality of products and technologies,
- ecological innovation, which refers to an organization's ability to pursue innovation in conjunction with the market in the context of external ecological trends and internal company conditions (Adamczyk, 2001),
- flexibility to adapt ecological products to customer needs in conjunction with marketing mix activities,
- creating the organization's pro-environmental image in connection with the positively perceived ecological product brand,
- reducing operating costs through environmentally friendly management.

The Sustainability Business philosophy is currently performing an increasingly important role in building competitive advantage in the marketplace, which is based on ten key principles (Burchell, 2011):

1. Positive influence of the enterprise.
2. Positively perceived brand and reputation.
3. Ecological processes consistent with the planned environmental effect.
4. Achieve acceptable financial results.
5. Implementation of multidimensional measurements.
6. Implement an effective and efficient competitive strategy.
7. Responding with clarity to the question: can a responsible company perform better, can a well-functioning enterprise be more responsible?
8. Testing effective business scenarios.
9. Work and growth.
10. Finding and eliminating gaps in the enterprise sustainability area based on indicator analysis.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The empirical research was conducted using a diagnostic survey method with the use of a questionnaire survey tool. A simple and a complex scale to measure attitudes were used to construct the questionnaire. Specifically, a Likert scale was used as the most appropriate scale to measure perceptions of a factor in social research (Croasmun and Ostrom, 2011). Respondents provided answers on a five-point scale („definitely yes”, „yes”, „neither yes/nor”, „no”, „definitely no”). The questionnaire was based on three blocks. The first concerned perceptions of the brand's commitment to sustainability and assessing its significance. The second area involved identifying ways to communicate the brand's commitment to sustainability. The third part related to the expected ways brands communicate their commitment to sustainability. Metric questions including gender, age, place of residence and respondents' education were an integral part of the questionnaire.

To assess the questions' reliability, a reliability analysis was conducted and the Alpha-Cronbach coefficient was calculated. For the question on perceived importance of brand engagement in sustainability, it amounted to 0.87. On the other hand, for the question on perceived and the question on expected ways to communicate brands' commitment to sustainability, the coefficient was 0.80 and 0.83, respectively. The indicator values confirm the high question reliability.

Research on identifying brand success factors in the context of sustainability was conducted using the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) technique on a representative Internet population using the research portal [www.badanie-opinii.pl](http://www.badanie-opinii.pl). The survey was commissioned to Biostat Sp. z o.o. Research and Development Centre. It is a commercial scientific unit with the status of a Research and Development Center in the register kept by the Minister of Entrepreneurship and Technology. Biostat Sp. z o.o. consists of a group of experienced experts, statisticians, IT specialists and analysts specializing in the practical application of research methods. Long-term business and scientific experience, supported by education in statistics, mathematics, IT and social sciences, allows for effective implementation of data analysis methods in commercial and research and development projects. The sample size for research was 1000 respondents. Biostat Sp. z o.o. agency guarantees the sample to be representative. The sample characteristics are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1. Sample structure*

<b>Group</b>	<b>Total Number of respondents (Percentage)</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
<b>Female</b>	493 (49.3%)
<b>Male</b>	507 (50.7%)
<b>Age</b>	
From 18 to 24 years	139 (13.9%)

From 25 to 34 years	261 (26.1%)
From 35 to 44 years	241 (24.1%)
From 45 to 54 years	152 (15.2%)
Over 55 years	207 (20.7%)
<b>Place of residence (number of inhabitants)</b>	
Rural	198 (19.8%)
City of up to 20,000 residents	107 (10.7%)
City from 20,000 to 50,000 residents	138 (13.8%)
City from 50,000 to 100,000 residents	143 (14.3%)
City from 100,000 to 250,000 residents	176 (17.6%)
City above 250,000 residents	238 (23.8%)
<b>Educations</b>	
Primary education	30 (3%)
Basic vocational education	84 (8.4%)
Secondary education	462 (46.2%)
Higher education	424 (42.4%)

*Source: Own creation.*

#### 4. Results and Conclusions

The survey analysis was based on an assessment of the brand engagement's importance to sustainability in considering brand power, brand image, business operations, and ways to communicate that engagement. Consumers rated individual elements describing the brand on a five-point Likert scale. Analysis of the collected data began by assessing the relationship between the responses given by the respondents in relation to gender. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to illustrate whether men and women differ in their perception of the sustainability importance of brand elements. In all issues, the null hypothesis that the feature distributions in the groups of men and women are the same, against the alternative hypothesis that they are different, was posed.

Based on the Mann-Whitney U test results, the null hypothesis was rejected in cases of the statements that:

- commitment to sustainability is a contemporary fashion among brands ( $p=0.433$ ),
- commitment to sustainability is a necessary part of brands' operations ( $p=0.093$ ),
- brands communicate their commitment to sustainability through the website ( $p=0.093$ ),
- brands communicate their commitment to sustainability through outdoor spaces ( $p=0.079$ ),
- brands communicate their commitment to sustainability through points of sale ( $p=0.183$ ),
- brands communicate their commitment to sustainability through printed materials ( $p=0.486$ ),
- brands should communicate their commitment to sustainability through printed materials ( $p=0.755$ ).

In other cases, an alternative hypothesis should be adopted that there are differences in perception. The significance of the differences in the answers given to the survey questions between the women's group and the men's group first concerns the perception of the key elements characterizing the brand in the context of its inclusion in sustainability. For the questions in Table 2, the null hypothesis of no difference between groups was rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis that the differences were significant. Results analysis showed that in all indicated areas women rated them higher than men, which means that for women these identifiers are more important. Women perceive brand sustainability efforts differently than men. They evaluate it as an element of image creation and a contemporary standard for brands. At the same time, the greatest differences in evaluation are seen in assessing the impact of a brand's commitment to sustainability on its power and market success. Significant differences in opinion between men and women also relate to the value of commitment to sustainability for the brand in the context of market action, and they consider it to be a contemporary standard of action, acting in a right and beneficial business manner.

**Table 2.** Significant Mann-Whitney U test results along with rank sums for men and women for the question on perceptions of brand commitment to sustainability

Question	Sum of F ranks	Sum of M ranks	U	Z	p-value
Noticing the sustainability efforts of brands	261758	238742	109964	3.2874	0.00101
Commitment to sustainability is part of branding	256029	244471	115693	2.03277	0.04207
Commitment to sustainability is part of brand power	263630	236870	108092	3.69739	0.00021
Commitment to sustainability is part of brand success	260456	240044	111266	3.00228	0.00268
Commitment to sustainability is a modern standard for brands	258571	241928	113150	2.58957	0.00961
Commitment to sustainability is right, but it is also beneficial to business performance	259719	240778	112003	2.84088	0.00449
Commitment to sustainability is beneficial to business performance	257658	242842	114064	2.38952	0.01687

*Source:* Own creation.

A particularly important research problem in this paper is to assess the relevance of brand involvement in sustainability. Respondents, given a choice of a five-point scale where 1 means 'not important' and 5- 'very important', agreed on the importance of the brand's commitment to sustainability. The mean score was 4.048, with a standard deviation of 0.86 and a coefficient of variation of 21.37. The Mann-Whitney U-test shows significant differences in the perception of this value in relation to the gender variable (Table 3). Women rated the brand's commitment level to sustainability higher than men. This result can be interpreted as transferring

a general assessment of the role and need for sustainability to the environment of which brands and products are an integral part.

**Table 3.** Significant Mann-Whitney *U* results along with rank sums for men and women for the question on rating the importance of brand commitment to sustainability

Question	Sum of F ranks	Sum of M ranks	U	Z	p-value
How important is it for brands to engage in sustainability?	26193	23856	10979	3.3252	0.0008

*Source:* Own creation.

Significant differences in the answers given to the survey questions between the women's group and the men's group can also be seen in the evaluation of the ways in which the brand's commitment to sustainability is communicated. Women relate differently than men to the different forms and tools for communicating these values (Table 4). In each of the mentioned tools, women have a higher score than men. There is a noticeable difference in the evaluation in relation to brand communication through real actions, social media and the use of influencers. This may indicate differences in the perception of marketing communication and its tools, which is better and more positively perceived by women. Consequently, the brand communications committed to sustainability also appeal to women more effectively.

**Table 4.** Significant Mann-Whitney *U* test results with rank sums for men and women for the question on perceived ways of communicating brand commitment to sustainability

Question	Sum of F ranks	Sum of M ranks	U	Z	p-value
real actions	264926	235573	106795	3.98133	0.000069
media advertising	260069	240431	111663	2.917532	0.003528
social media	263136	237363	108585	3.589317	0.000332
influencers	266179	234321	105543	4.255628	0.000021
participation in campaigns and conferences for sustainable development	256677	243823	115045	2.17468	0.029655

*Source:* Own creation.

The assessment of the methods communicating by brands, including sustainability and declaring such values, was compared with the assessment of the marketing communication methods expected by consumers in favor of brands. In this area, the differences in perceptions of the particular tools in the female and male groups are also clearly noticeable (Table 5). Women rate higher the importance of all the communication activities included in the table that brands should undertake to communicate their sustainability efforts to the surrounding community. Both the use of traditional solutions, i.e. advertising in the media, outdoor and at the point of



sale, and modern solutions, i.e. influencer marketing and social media marketing are indicated by women as appropriate tools to communicate the brand's commitment to sustainability.

**Table 5.** Significant Mann-Whitney U test results along with rank sums for men and women for the question on expected ways to communicate brand commitment to sustainability

Question	Sum of F ranks	Sum of M ranks	U	Z	p-value
real actions	261437	239063	110285	3.217125	0.001295
media advertising	267433	233067	104289	4.530255	0.000006
website	259085	241414	112636	2.702144	0.006890
social media	262720	237779	109001	3.498213	0.000468
outdoor	261237	239262	110484	3.173434	0.001507
points of sale	261602	238898	110120	3.233260	0.001141
participation in campaigns and conferences for sustainability	257256	243244	114466	2.301482	0.021365
influencers	266606	233893	105115	4.349251	0.000014
information placed on the product packaging	262908	237592	108814	3.539276	0.000401

*Source:* Own creation.

The results obtained confirm the importance of sustainability and the inclusion of this aspect in building brand assumptions. This is a particularly important element among the expected brand values to be delivered to its consumers. Moreover, it is an important aspect among the brand image components. The research results clearly indicate the role a brand's commitment to the sustainability of its environment can have in building brand power. The gender variation in the assessment of this meaning shows the communication and message building directions.

The research results obtained allow practical implications to be formulated for brands regarding the identification of brand power elements, brand image formation and communication methods regarding commitment to sustainability with respect to consumer gender. The conducted research may contribute, in a cause-effect perspective, to an attempt to compose a model approach to brand success factors in a strategic perspective.

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