

EVOLVING ROLE OF IMC IN SUSTAINABLE CORPORATE BRANDING: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES

Oguchukwu Raymond Okeke

and

Samson Ighiegbu Omosotomhe

Abstract

In an era where sustainability is a corporate imperative, Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) plays a pivotal role in shaping sustainable brand identities, yet the dynamic interplay between IMC and sustainable corporate branding remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by reviewing scholarly perspectives to assess how IMC strategies contribute to sustainable branding efforts. The primary objective is to examine IMC's evolving role in fostering sustainable corporate branding, analysing theoretical foundations, practical applications and emerging trends. Grounded in Stakeholder Theory, CSR Communication Theory and the Resource-Based View (RBV), the study evaluates how IMC aligns brand messaging with sustainability goals. Adopting a library-based methodology, it synthesises peer-reviewed articles, books and industry reports to construct a comprehensive review. Key arguments posit that IMC serves as a strategic tool for embedding sustainability into branding, consistency across channels enhances credibility and trust and digital/social media amplifies IMC's impact on sustainable narratives. The study concludes that IMC is indispensable in bridging corporate sustainability commitments with consumer perceptions, provided messaging is authentic and strategically integrated. Recommendations advocate for a holistic IMC approach leveraging storytelling, multi-channel engagement and transparency, while future research should explore cross-cultural variations in sustainability communication.

Introduction

In the contemporary business landscape, sustainability has transitioned from a peripheral concern to a central corporate imperative, compelling organisations to integrate environmental, social and governance (ESG) principles into their branding strategies (Dahlstrom, 2021). As stakeholders, including consumers, investors and regulators increasingly demand transparency and ethical accountability, corporations must leverage strategic communication tools to align their brand identities with sustainable values (Kim & Ferguson, 2021). Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) has emerged as a critical framework in this endeavour, enabling brands to craft cohesive narratives that reinforce sustainability commitments across multiple touchpoints (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2015). However, despite growing recognition of IMC's potential in sustainable branding, scholarly discourse remains fragmented, with limited synthesis of how IMC strategies evolve to meet the demands of sustainability-driven markets (Finne & Grönroos, 2017).

The intersection of IMC and sustainability presents a compelling research avenue, particularly as digital transformation reshapes consumer engagement (Valos, Habibi, Casidy, Driesener, & Maplestone, 2016). While traditional IMC models emphasise message

consistency and brand positioning (Kliatchko & Schultz, 2014), contemporary adaptations must account for dynamic stakeholder expectations, where authenticity and social responsibility influence brand perception (Pomering, 2017). Prior research highlights IMC's role in aligning corporate sustainability initiatives with consumer expectations (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2020), yet few studies systematically examine how IMC frameworks adapt to amplify sustainability narratives. This study fills that void by interrogating theoretical foundations, practical applications and emerging trends at this nexus.

Theoretical perspectives underpinning this analysis include Stakeholder Theory (Parmar, Freeman, Harrison, Purnell & De Colle, 2010), which posits that sustainable branding success hinges on multi-stakeholder engagement; CSR Communication Theory (Morsing & Schultz, 2011), which emphasises transparency in sustainability messaging; and the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 2012), which frames IMC as a strategic asset in cultivating competitive, sustainability-aligned brand equity.

Key arguments advanced in this work are: (1) IMC functions as a strategic mechanism for embedding sustainability into corporate branding, ensuring message coherence across channels (Luxton, Reid & Mavondo, 2015); (2) digital and social media amplify IMC's impact by facilitating real-time, interactive sustainability storytelling (Tafesse & Wien, 2018); and (3) inconsistent or inauthentic sustainability communication risks stakeholder skepticism, necessitating greater strategic alignment between IMC and corporate ESG goals (Schmeltz, 2017).

By consolidating these insights, this study will contribute to academic and practitioner understanding of how IMC can be optimised for sustainable branding in an era of heightened ESG scrutiny. The findings will underscore the need for organisations to adopt holistic IMC strategies that prioritise transparency, multi-channel consistency and stakeholder co-creation (Keller, 2016). Future research directions, including cross-cultural analyses of IMC's efficacy in diverse sustainability contexts, are also proposed.

Statement of the Problem

The growing emphasis on sustainability in corporate practice has necessitated a re-evaluation of how brands communicate their environmental and social commitments (Dahlstrom, 2021). Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) has been widely recognised as a strategic framework for ensuring consistent and persuasive brand messaging (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2015). However, while existing research has explored IMC's role in traditional branding contexts, its application in sustainable corporate branding remains underexamined,

particularly in terms of how organisations align IMC strategies with sustainability goals (Finne & Grönroos, 2017). This gap is problematic, given that sustainability messaging requires higher levels of transparency, credibility and stakeholder engagement than conventional branding efforts (Schmeltz, 2017).

Several studies have investigated aspects of IMC and sustainability independently but have not sufficiently bridged the two concepts. For instance, while Keller (2016) emphasises the importance of message consistency in IMC and Du et al. (2020) highlight the role of CSR communication in shaping consumer trust, few studies critically analysed how IMC frameworks must adapt to accommodate sustainability-specific challenges, such as green-washing risks (Pomering, 2017) or multi-stakeholder expectations (Kim & Ferguson, 2021). Additionally, while digital and social media have transformed IMC's reach (Tafesse & Wien, 2018), research has yet to fully explore how these platforms can be leveraged for authentic sustainability storytelling (Valos et al., 2016).

A key limitation in existing literature is the fragmented approach to studying IMC and sustainability. Some studies focus narrowly on consumer perceptions (Luxton et al., 2015), while others examine corporate sustainability reporting (Morsing & Schultz, 2011) without integrating these perspectives into a cohesive IMC strategy. Furthermore, while Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, Harrison & Zyglidopoulos, 2018) and CSR Communication Theory (Morsing & Schultz, 2011) provide useful lenses, they have not been systematically applied to assess IMC's role in sustaining long-term brand equity in sustainability-driven markets (Barney, 2012).

Research Questions

1. How does IMC facilitate (or hinder) the integration of sustainability into corporate branding strategies?
2. What are the key challenges organisations face in aligning IMC with sustainability objectives?
3. How can digital communication channels be optimised within IMC frameworks to enhance sustainable branding?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three interconnected theoretical perspectives that illuminate the evolving role of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) in sustainable corporate branding: Stakeholder Theory, CSR Communication Theory and the Resource-Based View (RBV). Together, these frameworks provide a robust foundation for analysing how

organisations can strategically align their communication practices with sustainability objectives in contemporary business environments.

Stakeholder Theory (Freeman et al., 2018) forms the primary lens for understanding the complex dynamics between corporations and their diverse stakeholder groups in sustainability communication. The theory posits that organisations must balance the interests of multiple constituencies; including consumers, investors, employees and communities to achieve long-term success (Harrison, Freeman & Sá de Abreu, 2015). In the context of sustainable branding, IMC serves as a critical mechanism for engaging these stakeholders through consistent, transparent messaging across multiple channels (Morsing & Schultz, 2011). Recent studies emphasise that stakeholder expectations for corporate sustainability have intensified (Kim & Ferguson, 2021), requiring more sophisticated IMC approaches that go beyond traditional marketing communications to incorporate dialogue and co-creation (Finne & Grönroos, 2017).

CSR Communication Theory (Morsing & Schultz, 2011) complements this perspective by specifically addressing how organisations communicate their sustainability commitments. The theory distinguishes between three communication strategies: stakeholder information, response and involvement, with the latter being most effective for building authentic sustainable brands (Du et al., 2020). This framework is particularly relevant for examining how IMC can mitigate the risks of green-washing, a growing concern in sustainable branding (Pomering, 2017). Recent research suggests that integrated, multi-channel communication strategies enhance the credibility of sustainability claims (Schmeltz, 2017), while inconsistent messaging can erode stakeholder trust (Aji & Sutikno, 2015).

The Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 2012) provides the third theoretical pillar, conceptualising IMC capabilities as strategic resources that can generate sustainable competitive advantage. From this perspective, an organisation's ability to integrate sustainability messaging across all communication touch-points represents a valuable, rare and difficult-to-imitate resource (Luxton et al., 2015). The digital transformation of communication channels has further enhanced the potential for IMC to create value in sustainable branding contexts (Valos et al., 2016), particularly through social media platforms that enable real-time engagement and transparency (Tafesse & Wien, 2018).

These theoretical perspectives collectively address key dimensions of IMC's role in sustainable branding:

1. Multi-stakeholder engagement (Stakeholder Theory)
2. Authenticity and credibility (CSR Communication Theory)
3. Strategic value creation (Resource-Based View)

The integration of these frameworks allows for a comprehensive analysis of how IMC must evolve to meet the challenges of sustainable corporate branding in an era of heightened ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) expectations (Dahlstrom, 2021). They particularly illuminate the tension between standardisation (necessary for brand consistency) and adaptation (required for authentic sustainability communication across diverse stakeholder groups and cultural contexts) (Keller, 2016).

Conceptual Review

The intersection of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) and sustainable corporate branding represents a dynamic area of academic inquiry that has gained significant traction in the post-2010 era. This conceptual review synthesises contemporary scholarship to map the evolving relationship between these two domains, highlighting key theoretical developments, empirical findings and emerging challenges.

The IMC-Sustainability Nexus

Modern IMC has transcended its traditional role as a message coordination tool to become a strategic framework for value co-creation (Kliatchko & Schultz, 2014). In sustainable branding contexts, IMC serves as the connective tissue between corporate sustainability commitments and stakeholder perceptions (Du et al., 2020). The digital transformation of communication landscapes has particularly amplified IMC's potential, with social media enabling real-time sustainability storytelling (Tafesse & Wien, 2018). However, this expansion has introduced new complexities, as organisations must now navigate the tension between message consistency (a core IMC principle) and the need for localised, context-sensitive sustainability communication (Finne & Grönroos, 2017).

Strategic Dimensions of Sustainable IMC

Contemporary research identifies three strategic dimensions where IMC contributes to sustainable branding:

1. **Authenticity Construction:** The credibility crisis surrounding corporate sustainability claims has made authenticity a central concern (Schmeltz, 2017). IMC frameworks that incorporate stakeholder participation and transparent reporting mechanisms have shown greater success in establishing authentic sustainable brands (Morsing & Schultz, 2011).
2. **Multi-Channel Integration:** The proliferation of communication channels has necessitated more sophisticated IMC approaches. Studies demonstrate that organisations achieving true integration across traditional media, digital platforms and experiential marketing report stronger sustainability brand equity (Valos et al., 2016; Luxton et al., 2015).

3. Stakeholder-Centric Communication: Moving beyond the consumer focus of traditional IMC, sustainable branding requires engagement with diverse stakeholder groups (Kim & Ferguson, 2021). This shift reflects the growing influence of ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) metrics on corporate reputation (Dahlstrom, 2021).

Emerging Challenges and Tensions

Recent scholarship highlights several unresolved tensions in the IMC-sustainability interface:

The Greenwashing Paradox: As organisations increase sustainability communication, so does stakeholder skepticism (Pomering, 2017). IMC strategies must balance promotional objectives with substantive sustainability performance (Aji & Sutikno, 2015).

Measurement Complexities: Traditional IMC metrics often fail to capture the long-term, relationship-building aspects of sustainable branding (Keller, 2016). New evaluation frameworks are emerging that incorporate both brand and sustainability performance indicators (Harrison et al., 2015).

Cultural Adaptation: The globalisation of sustainability discourse has revealed significant cross-cultural variations in stakeholder expectations. This challenges the standardised approaches historically favoured in IMC practice.

Scholarly Debates and Synthesis on IMC and Sustainable Branding

Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) has evolved from a tactical communication tool to a strategic framework that plays a vital role in shaping sustainable corporate branding. Contemporary scholarly discourse underscores the growing significance of IMC in promoting brand consistency, stakeholder engagement and long-term brand equity, especially in a global environment increasingly concerned with sustainability and ethical corporate behaviour.

The fundamental premise of IMC lies in the strategic coordination of all brand messages to create a unified and compelling brand narrative (Kliatchko & Schultz, 2014). In the context of sustainability, IMC now serves as a platform for corporations to communicate their environmental, social and governance (ESG) commitments authentically. This alignment is essential for building corporate brands that resonate with socially conscious consumers and investors. As Kitchen & Burgmann (2015) assert, the integration of sustainability values into the brand message is no longer optional but imperative for corporate survival in the 21st century.

Scholars have also highlighted the shift from message-centric to stakeholder-centric IMC models. According to Luxton, Reid & Mavondo (2015), effective IMC today necessitates a two-way dialogue between corporations and stakeholders, leveraging digital platforms to foster transparency and trust. This dialogic approach enhances stakeholder engagement and strengthens brand credibility, particularly when sustainability practices are substantiated by consistent brand actions and messaging across all touch-points.

Moreover, IMC has become instrumental in internal branding efforts, which are crucial for sustainable brand identity. Employees are now seen as key brand ambassadors. As noted by Finne & Grönroos (2017), internal integration ensures that employees understand and embody the brand's sustainability values, leading to more authentic external communications and better brand-customer alignment.

Nevertheless, the literature presents divergent perspectives regarding the practical implementation of IMC in sustainability initiatives. Some scholars argue that IMC remains underutilised in many organisations due to structural silos and a lack of strategic coordination (Porcu, del Barrio-García & Kitchen, 2017). Others believe that digital transformation and the rise of AI-driven communication platforms are making integrated and sustainable branding more attainable than ever (Mulhern, 2015; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2019).

So, scholarly perspectives converge on the idea that IMC is not merely a marketing function but a strategic enabler of sustainable corporate branding. While challenges remain in its execution, especially in aligning sustainability narratives with organisational behaviour, the role of IMC continues to expand in scope and influence.

Review of Empirical Studies

Luxton, Reid, & Mavondo (2015) in their work titled, "IMC Capability: Antecedents and Implications for Brand Performance" examined how IMC drives organizational outcomes. Using survey data from 232 Australian firms, they developed an IMC capability framework showing that cross-functional coordination significantly enhances brand performance. Their key finding that internal alignment precedes external communication effectiveness supports this study's argument for integrated sustainability messaging. However, their general branding focus differs from this work's specific examination of sustainability contexts. They recommend greater emphasis on digital integration, a suggestion this study extend specifically to sustainability communication channels.

Tafesse & Wien (2018) in their study titled, "Using Social Media Marketing Activities to Build Brand Equity" quantitatively analysed 415 social media campaigns. Their rationale centred on understanding how digital platforms transform IMC implementation. Using content

analysis and engagement metrics, they found interactive content generated 37% higher brand recall. While their digital focus aligns with this work, they omit sustainability-specific communication challenges that this study addresses through green-washing analysis. Their recommendation to prioritise platform-specific content strategies informs this works discussion of sustainability storytelling across channels.

Schmeltz (2017) in "Identical or Just Compatible? The Utility of Corporate Identity Values in Communicating CSR" employed qualitative case studies of 12 Scandinavian firms. Motivated by growing CSR communication challenges, he examined message consistency through document analysis and executive interviews. His key finding that aligned identity-values communication builds authenticity directly supports this works authenticity arguments. However, his narrow CSR reporting focus contrasts with this study's broader IMC perspective. Their recommendation to audit communication consistency informs our proposed sustainability IMC framework.

Kim & Ferguson (2021) in Corporate Communications investigated "Public Expectations of CSR Communication" through a survey of 1,200 U.S. consumers. Their rationale addressed the knowledge gap in stakeholder communication preferences. Using factor analysis, they identified transparency and proof points as key expectations. Their consumer-centric approach differs from this multi-stakeholder view encompassing investors and regulators. They recommend regular expectation assessments, which this study adapt for ongoing sustainability message testing.

Valos et al. (2016) in Journal of Marketing Management studied "Integrating Social Media into IMC Strategy" through longitudinal analysis of 150 brands. Their rationale emphasised the digital transformation of IMC. Using mixed methods, they found social media increased campaign effectiveness by 28% but created coordination challenges. While supporting the digital IMC argument, they neglect sustainability-specific impacts. Their integration framework informs but requires adaptation for this works sustainability context, particularly regarding ESG metric incorporation.

Methodology

This study employs a library-based research method to critically examine the evolving role of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) in sustainable corporate branding. The approach involves systematic identification, evaluation and synthesis of scholarly literature to develop a comprehensive understanding of contemporary perspectives and emerging trends in the field. The study draws on peer-reviewed journal articles, books, industry reports and conference papers published between 2010 and 2024 to ensure relevance to current marketing and

sustainability discourse. Key academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science and JSTOR, were searched using relevant keywords.

Discussion

This critical review reveals three fundamental shifts in how IMC facilitates sustainable corporate branding in the contemporary business landscape. First, the transition from message consistency to authenticity verification emerges as a defining characteristic of effective sustainability communication. While traditional IMC emphasised uniform messaging (Kliatchko & Schultz, 2014), sustainable branding demands verifiable claims supported by transparent reporting mechanisms (Schmeltz, 2017). This shift responds directly to growing stakeholder skepticism, with 68% of consumers now requiring proof of sustainability claims before believing corporate messages (Kim & Ferguson, 2021).

The digital transformation of communication channels presents both opportunities and challenges for sustainable IMC implementation. Social media platforms enable real-time engagement and participatory storytelling (Tafesse & Wien, 2018), yet simultaneously increase vulnerability to public scrutiny of sustainability claims. Our analysis confirms Valos et al.'s (2016) finding that brands achieving true cross-channel integration demonstrate 42% higher sustainability perception scores. However, the reviewed literature reveals a troubling gap; only 23% of Fortune 500 companies successfully align their sustainability narratives across all digital and traditional channels (Dahlstrom, 2021).

The stakeholder landscape for sustainable branding has undergone significant expansion, necessitating more sophisticated IMC approaches. Beyond traditional consumer audiences, organisations must now engage with ESG-focused investors, activist groups and regulatory bodies (Du et al., 2020). This multi-stakeholder environment challenges the conventional consumer-centric IMC model, requiring adaptive frameworks that balance often-competing expectations (Morsing & Schultz, 2011). Particularly noteworthy is the emergence of employee advocacy as a critical IMC channel, with companies leveraging internal stakeholders as authenticity ambassadors (Pomering, 2017).

The reviewed literature identifies three persistent challenges in IMC for sustainable branding:

1. Current metrics fail to capture the long-term relationship-building aspects of sustainability communication (Keller, 2016). While brands track immediate engagement metrics, few monitor how IMC contributes to sustained behavioural change toward sustainable consumption.

2. Global brands struggle to reconcile the need for consistent sustainability positioning with local cultural interpretations of sustainability. Standardised IMC approaches often prove inadequate in diverse markets.
3. The mismatch between short-term marketing cycles and long-term sustainability impacts creates inherent tensions in communication planning (Luxton et al., 2015).

Emerging from this analysis is a revised conceptualisation of IMC's role in sustainable branding; not merely as a messaging tool, but as a strategic interface between corporate sustainability performance and stakeholder perception. This aligns with Finne & Grönroos's (2017) communication-in-use paradigm, emphasising ongoing dialogue over one-way transmission. The most effective sustainable IMC strategies combine three elements: substantive sustainability actions, transparent multi-channel communication and mechanisms for stakeholder participation in sustainability storytelling.

Conclusion

This article explored the transformative role of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) in shaping sustainable corporate branding in today's business landscape. Our critical review reveals that IMC has evolved from a traditional marketing function to a strategic imperative that connects corporate sustainability efforts with stakeholder expectations. In an era where consumers and investors increasingly demand authenticity, IMC serves as the vital link between a company's sustainability actions and its brand perception.

The digital revolution has dramatically expanded both the opportunities and challenges for sustainable branding. While new communication channels enable more engaging and transparent storytelling, they also subject corporate claims to greater public scrutiny. Effective sustainable branding now requires moving beyond one-way messaging to creating genuine dialogues with diverse stakeholders. However, significant challenges remain in measuring impact, adapting to cultural differences and maintaining credibility amidst growing skepticism about corporate sustainability claims.

Ultimately, the paper has demonstrated that IMC is no longer just about promoting a sustainable brand image, but about facilitating meaningful connections between corporate sustainability performance and stakeholder understanding. When executed with authenticity and strategic alignment, IMC can transform sustainability from a compliance obligation into a source of competitive advantage and brand value.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the researchers make the following recommendations:

1. Sustainability communication should be woven into core business strategy, moving beyond a siloed marketing function. This involves building cross-functional teams that blend sustainability expertise with communication skills and developing clear guidelines to prevent overstating achievements.
2. Transparent reporting systems that use verifiable data and concrete examples to support sustainability claims should be implemented. This means leveraging digital platforms to share authentic, behind-the-scenes stories about your efforts.
3. There should be a shift from one-way broadcasting to participatory communication that actively invites stakeholder engagement. Content that educates audiences about complex sustainability should be created, without oversimplifying, to encourage dialogue and shared understanding.
4. Communicators should be trained to help them navigate the unique challenges of sustainability storytelling and develop flexible communication frameworks that maintain core messaging while allowing for local market adaptations, relevance and resonance across diverse audiences.
5. Metrics should be developed to capture not only brand impact but also the actual sustainability outcomes of your initiatives. This allows one to demonstrate tangible progress and build credibility with your audience.

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