

Role Of Sustainable Marketing Practices in Developing Brand Legitimacy for Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract—In today's highly competitive higher education environment, institutions face growing expectations to demonstrate credibility, authenticity, and trustworthiness to students and other key stakeholders. The present study explores how sustainable marketing practices (SMPs) contribute to strengthening brand authenticity (BA) in higher education institutions (HEIs). Drawing on Authentic Branding Theory and Stakeholder Theory, the research investigates the relationships among sustainable marketing practices, brand authenticity, brand trust, student loyalty, and institutional reputation.

The study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional research design, with data collected from 400 students enrolled in both public and private universities. The data were analysed using SPSS and Smart PLS software. The findings reveal that sustainable marketing practices have a strong and statistically significant positive effect on brand authenticity ($\beta = 0.621, p < 0.001$). Moreover, brand authenticity was found to significantly enhance both brand trust ($\beta = 0.672, p < 0.001$) and student loyalty ($\beta = 0.643, p < 0.001$), indicating its important mediating role between sustainability initiatives and student loyalty outcomes. However, the results also show that perceptions of greenwashing negatively moderate the relationship between sustainable marketing practices and brand authenticity ($\beta = -0.142, p = 0.004$), underscoring the potential reputational risks when sustainability claims are perceived as exaggerated or insincere.

Overall, the study contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of brand authenticity within the context of higher education branding. It also offers valuable practical insights for HEIs, suggesting that sustainability efforts should be embedded within core marketing strategies and supported by transparent, honest communication.

Index Terms—Sustainable Marketing Practices; Brand Authenticity; Higher Education Institutions; Brand Trust; Student Loyalty; Greenwashing Perception; Stakeholder Theory

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly competitive higher education environment, universities are becoming more aware that academic excellence alone is no longer sufficient to attract prospective students and satisfy wider stakeholder expectations. Instead, students and other stakeholders are placing greater emphasis on authenticity, credibility, and alignment with personal and societal values when choosing a university (Girardin, 2024). At the same time, the growing global emphasis on sustainability—both in public discourse and individual decision-making—presents higher education institutions (HEIs) with an opportunity to use sustainable marketing practices not merely as operational commitments, but as meaningful strategic tools for brand differentiation (Castro-Gómez et al., 2024; Selby, 2009). This convergence of sustainability, marketing, and institutional branding creates an important context for examining how sustainable marketing practices can contribute to strengthening brand authenticity within higher education.

Sustainable marketing practices, particularly those that integrate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations into marketing communications, stakeholder engagement, and value propositions, have been widely examined in corporate contexts as drivers of brand trust and favourable consumer perceptions (Bulmer, 2024; Selby, 2009). Within HEIs, such practices may be reflected in commitments to campus sustainability initiatives, the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into academic curricula, active engagement with communities and industry partners, and the transparent communication of these efforts to stakeholders. Existing research suggests that institutions which position sustainability as a core

element of their identity and strategy tend to benefit from a stronger brand reputation among students and the wider public (Castro-Gómez et al., 2024).

Brand authenticity refers to stakeholders' perceptions that an institution remains true to its stated values, demonstrates consistency between its actions and communications, operates transparently, and aligns its objectives with stakeholder expectations (Girardin, 2024). For higher education institutions, authenticity extends well beyond marketing messages. It encompasses how effectively the institution fulfils its mission, how coherently it operates across academic, social, and environmental domains, and how credibly it builds trust with students, alumni, faculty members, and external partners. When HEIs adopt sustainable marketing practices in a genuine and integrated manner, they are better positioned to enhance brand authenticity by demonstrating real commitment rather than symbolic gestures, aligning sustainability initiatives with institutional values, and reinforcing perceptions of legitimacy and trustworthiness.

Although a growing body of literature addresses sustainability in higher education from operational, curricular, and institutional perspectives, relatively few studies have examined sustainable marketing practices specifically as mechanisms for building brand authenticity within HEIs. This gap is particularly significant given the increasing pressure on universities to differentiate themselves, attract high-quality students, engage diverse stakeholders, and demonstrate their broader social value. Institutions that are able to authentically implement and communicate sustainability initiatives may not only strengthen their brand positioning but also foster deeper emotional and rational connections with stakeholders, ultimately supporting long-term loyalty and institutional resilience.

Against this background, the present study seeks to examine the role of sustainable marketing practices in enhancing brand authenticity within higher education institutions. Specifically, it explores how HEIs implement and communicate sustainability initiatives, how stakeholders interpret these efforts in terms of authenticity, and how such perceptions shape overall evaluations of institutional branding. The findings are expected to contribute to the theoretical literature on higher education branding while also offering practical

insights for institutional marketers aiming to build credible, sustainable, and authentic university brands in an increasingly values-driven educational landscape.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A literature review provides a critical and systematic overview of existing scholarly work on a particular topic. It involves identifying, analysing, and evaluating prior studies, theories, and empirical findings to establish what is currently known, highlight gaps in the literature, and clarify how the present study contributes to advancing knowledge in the field (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

2.1 BRAND AUTHENTICITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION BRANDING

Recent research has reaffirmed that brand authenticity—defined as the perception that an institution remains true to its values and demonstrates consistency between what it communicates and what it practices—has become a key driver of positive branding outcomes for higher education institutions. A 2024 study published in the *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* found that perceptions of authenticity strongly influence brand attitudes, positive word-of-mouth, and emotional attachment to the university brand, positioning authenticity as an important source of competitive differentiation in higher education marketing (Girardin, 2024).

Moving beyond the higher education context, an integrative review published in 2023 conceptualises brand authenticity as a multidimensional construct comprising dimensions such as continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. This framework provides robust theoretical foundations, and measurement approaches that higher education researchers can adapt when examining authenticity-related outcomes within educational settings (Campagna et al., 2023).

2.2 SUSTAINABLE MARKETING AS A PATHWAY TO AUTHENTICITY

Sustainable marketing refers to the ways in which institutions integrate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles into their value propositions, operational practices, and communication strategies in order to create value for stakeholders. Although much of the empirical research

on sustainable marketing originates outside the higher education sector, more recent studies suggest that visible and verifiable sustainability initiatives—particularly when communicated in a transparent manner—reinforce perceptions of an organisation “living up to” its stated values, a core element of brand authenticity. For instance, research on “green authenticity” in digital environments demonstrates that when sustainability messages are perceived as authentic rather than as greenwashing, they generate stronger positive responses and encourage favourable downstream behaviours (Fang et al., 2024).

Within the higher education context, growing evidence indicates that students actively observe, evaluate, and respond to ESG- and sustainability-related signals communicated by universities. A 2024 study focusing on university students found that institutional ESG practices significantly influence behavioural intentions such as advocacy and loyalty, highlighting the role of sustainability commitments in shaping student–brand relationships (Hasan et al., 2024). Similarly, findings from related higher education studies show that sustainability-oriented curricula and campus initiatives foster attitudes and behaviours aligned with a university’s sustainability identity, thereby creating a fertile environment for authenticity signalling through marketing communications (Abdullahi et al., 2024).

2.3 STUDENT DEMAND AND MARKET SIGNALS EVALUATING RANKINGS AND SURVEYS

Survey evidence from 2023 onwards suggests that sustainability has become an increasingly salient factor in students’ university decision-making processes. For example, analyses of international student data conducted by QS between 2023 and 2024 indicate that a substantial proportion of prospective students actively seek information about institutional sustainability performance and consider it when evaluating their university options. This highlights the growing importance of sustainability-related messaging in recruitment and communication strategies (QS International Student Survey, 2023).

At the sector level, indicators such as the *Times Higher Education* (THE) Impact Rankings have emerged as prominent and widely recognised measures of universities’ performance against the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs). Many institutions now reference these rankings in their marketing communications to substantiate sustainability claims. When such claims are supported by credible performance outcomes, they may enhance perceptions of brand authenticity; however, misalignment between messaging and actual performance risks undermining trust (Times Higher Education, May 25, 2023).

2.4 COMMUNICATION QUALITY: TRANSPARENCY VS. GREENWASHING

A recurring theme across recent studies is that the way sustainability is communicated is just as important as the sustainability actions themselves. Perceptions of greenwashing have been shown to undermine trust and weaken the positive impact of sustainability-related messages, whereas transparent and independently verified claims tend to strengthen perceptions of authenticity. Empirical studies published between 2024 and 2025 indicate that authenticity perceptions often mediate the relationship between sustainability communication and outcomes such as student choice and loyalty. In contrast, when sustainability claims are perceived as exaggerated or misleading, they can trigger scepticism and reputational backlash (Fang et al., 2024).

In addition, sector-level commentary and case analyses since 2023 suggest that poorly aligned partnerships and superficial sustainability initiatives are increasingly framed by stakeholders and the media as instances of greenwashing. For universities that position themselves as sustainability leaders, such misalignment poses significant reputational risks, potentially undermining trust and damaging long-term brand credibility (Leal et al., 2024).

2.5 EVIDENCE FROM THE STUDENT POPULATIONS

Empirical research involving higher education students since 2023 indicates a noticeable increase in sustainability literacy and rising expectations regarding institutional responsibility. Evidence from multi-country and institution-level studies suggests that students’ sustainability-related knowledge and attitudes are positively associated with engagement and pro-sustainability behaviours, positioning them as attentive and critical evaluators of universities’ sustainability claims (Leal et al., 2024).

In addition, experimental and survey-based research links institutional ESG practices and perceived service quality with student loyalty and advocacy. These findings imply that when sustainability initiatives are credible, embedded within the student experience, and communicated in a consistent and transparent manner, they can strengthen authentic brand relationships between universities and their students (Lin & Chen, 2025).

2.6 RESEARCH GAP:

Although sustainable marketing has been widely examined in corporate sectors such as consumer goods, retail, and tourism where it is recognised as a key driver of trust and brand authenticity (Campagna et al., 2023; Fang et al., 2024)—its application within higher education branding remains limited. Existing studies in HEIs primarily address sustainability from operational or pedagogical perspectives, offering little insight into its role as a strategic marketing and branding mechanism.

Moreover, empirical research linking sustainable marketing practices to brand authenticity in higher education is scarce, and the potential mediating and moderating relationships within this process remain largely unexplored. In particular, the mediating role of brand authenticity between sustainable marketing and brand outcomes has not been systematically tested. Finally, despite acknowledging students' growing interest in sustainability, few studies directly examine how students interpret sustainability communications and how these perceptions shape judgments of institutional authenticity.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

3.1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This chapter outlines the methodological framework adopted to examine the role of sustainable marketing practices in enhancing brand authenticity among higher educational institutions (HEIs). It details the research design, population and sample, data collection techniques, instrumentation, validity and reliability testing, and data analysis procedures. The chosen methodology ensures the study's objectives are met through systematic and replicable scientific inquiry (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

3.1.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopts a quantitative, descriptive, and explanatory research design.

- The descriptive component helps to outline how HEIs implement sustainable marketing practices.
- The explanatory aspect examines cause effect relationships between sustainable marketing practices (independent variable) and key dependent variables brand authenticity, brand trust, student loyalty, and institutional reputation.

A cross-sectional survey method is employed to collect primary data from students enrolled in higher education institutions. This design allows for a snapshot of perceptions and behaviours at a specific point in time, ensuring efficiency and comparability (Saunders et al., 2023).

3.1.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

The study uses a deductive research approach guided by the theoretical framework and hypotheses developed from existing literature. Hypotheses (H1–H4) derived earlier are tested empirically using statistical methods, aligning with positivist philosophy and quantitative reasoning (Bryman, 2023).

3.1.3 POPULATION AND SAMPLING:

The population refers to the entire group of individuals, organizations, or elements that share common characteristics relevant to a research study and sampling is the process of selecting a subset (sample) from the total population to represent the whole group in the research.

3.1.4 TARGET POPULATION

The population of the study includes students enrolled in higher educational institutions (public and private universities). Students are considered key stakeholders since they directly perceive marketing communications and authenticity signals from their institutions.

3.1.5 SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

A stratified random sampling method is employed to ensure representativeness across institution types (public/private) and academic levels (undergraduate/postgraduate).

3.1.6 SAMPLE SIZE

The sample size is determined using Cochran's formula ($n = Z^2pq/e^2$). Based on a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, the recommended minimum sample size is approximately 385 respondents. However, to enhance reliability, 400- 50 responses are targeted.

3.2 RESEARCH INSTRUMENT AND QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The primary instrument for data collection is a structured questionnaire divided into five sections:

TABLE 1: AUTHOR SELF-CREATED

Section	Construct	Number of Items	Scale Type
A	Demographic Information	4	Nominal
B	Sustainable Marketing Practices	7–9	5-point Likert (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)
C	Brand Authenticity	7	5-point Likert
D	Brand Trust	6	5-point Likert
E	Student Loyalty & Institutional Reputation	8–10	5-point Likert

The empirical literature suggests together a plausible pathway: substantive sustainability practices → transparent sustainability communication → perceived brand authenticity → stronger brand outcomes (attitude, advocacy, choice, loyalty). Strong, verifiable signals appear to strengthen brand authenticity effects while applying sustainability using any digital approach or actions.

3.3 HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT:

Developing hypothesis is an essential step in the research process because it guides researcher's study and defines what is aimed to test or prove. The empirical studies, research problems, defined

variables and research reviews has been considered to develop the hypothesis as follows:

- H1: Sustainable marketing practices have a significant positive effect on perceived brand authenticity in higher education institutions.
- H2: Brand authenticity has a significant positive effect on brand trust in higher education institutions.
- H3: Brand authenticity mediates the relationship between sustainable marketing practices and student loyalty.
- H4: Perceived greenwashing negatively moderates the relationship between sustainable marketing practices and brand authenticity.

3.4 CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The conceptual framework for this study illustrates how sustainable marketing practices (SMP) influence brand authenticity (BA), brand trust (BT), student loyalty (SL), and institutional reputation (IR) within higher educational institutions (HEIs). The model also integrates brand authenticity as a *mediating variable* and greenwashing perception (GP) as a *moderating variable*.

This framework is grounded in theories of authentic branding, stakeholder theory, and sustainable marketing, which collectively suggest that transparent, value-driven communication fosters credibility, emotional connection, and long-term stakeholder engagement (Campagna et al., 2023; Girardin, 2024; Bulmer, 2024).

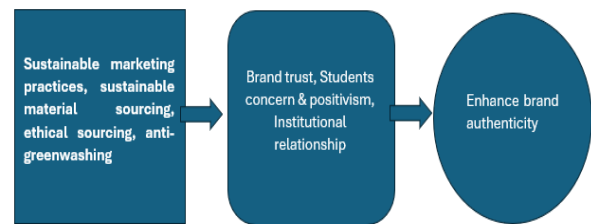


FIGURE 1, SOURCE: AUTHORS SELF-ELABORATION BASED ON LITERATURE REVIEWED

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

Data Analysis including coding and editing was done using SPSS and advance excel and the relationship between the variable was analysed using Smart PLS.

4.1 DATA SCREENING AND PREPARATION

A total of 420 responses were collected from students enrolled in higher education institutions. After removing incomplete responses, 400 valid cases were retained for analysis. Data were screened for missing values, outliers, and normality. All missing data were minimal (<2%) and treated using mean substitution. The distribution of variables satisfied the normality assumption with skewness and kurtosis values within the acceptable range of ± 2.0 (Kline, 2023).

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

TABLE 2: AUTHOR SELF-CREATED

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	180	45%
	Female	220	55%
Age	18–24 years	240	60%
	25–30 years	120	30%
	Above 30 years	40	10%
Institution Type	Public University	190	47.5%
	Private University	210	52.5%

INTERPRETATION:

Most respondents were young adults aged 18–24 years, with a balanced representation across genders

and institution types. This indicates that the sample adequately reflects the primary demographic composition of the student population in HEIs.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS: The mean and standard deviation (SD) for all constructs.

TABLE 3: AUTHOR SELF-CREATED BASED ON ANALYSIS

Construct	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Sustainable Marketing Practices (SMP)	4.12	0.58	High agreement
Brand Authenticity (BA)	4.05	0.61	High perceived authenticity
Brand Trust (BT)	4.09	0.56	Strong trust level
Student Loyalty (SL)	3.98	0.63	Positive loyalty trend
Institutional Reputation (IR)	4.11	0.59	High institutional reputation

INTERPRETATION:

Respondents rated sustainable marketing practices and brand authenticity highly (mean ≈ 4.1), indicating that sustainability-driven strategies are perceived positively by students.

RELIABILITY ANALYSIS

Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess internal consistency.

TABLE 4: AUTHOR SELF-CREATED BASED ON ANALYSIS

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's α	Result				
Sustainable Marketing Practices	10	0.893	Reliable				
Brand Authenticity	8	0.876	Reliable				
Brand Trust	5	0.853	Reliable				
Student Loyalty	5	0.867	Reliable				
Institutional Reputation	5	0.882	Reliable				

INTERPRETATION:

All constructs achieved Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.80$, confirming strong internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978).

CORRELATION ANALYSIS

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to assess linear relationships among constructs.

TABLE 5: AUTHOR SELF-CREATED BASED ON ANALYSIS: (P < 0.01)

Variables	SMP	BA	BT	SL	IR
Sustainable Marketing Practices	1				
Brand Authenticity	.631*	1			
Brand Trust	.564*	.673*	1		
Student Loyalty	.518*	.649*	.688*	1	
Institutional Reputation	.590*	.658*	.613*	.665*	1

INTERPRETATION:

All constructs are significantly correlated. Sustainable Marketing Practices show a strong positive correlation with Brand Authenticity ($r = .621$), supporting a meaningful association for hypothesis testing.

REGRESSION ANALYSIS

H1: Sustainable Marketing Practices \rightarrow Brand Authenticity

TABLE 6: AUTHOR SELF-CREATED BASED ON ANALYSIS

Variable	B	t-value	p-value	Result
SMP \rightarrow BA	0.621	12.48	0.000	Supported

INTERPRETATION:

Sustainable Marketing Practices have a significant positive effect on Brand Authenticity ($\beta = 0.621$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H1 is supported.

H2: Brand Authenticity \rightarrow Student loyalty

TABLE 7: AUTHOR SELF-CREATED BASED ON ANALYSIS

Variable	B	t-value	p-value	Result
BA \rightarrow BT	0.672	14.22	0.000	Supported

INTERPRETATION:

Brand Authenticity significantly predicts Brand Trust. Thus, H2 is supported.

H3: Mediating Effect of Brand Authenticity (SMP \rightarrow SL)

Using PROCESS Macro (Model 4), the indirect effect of SMP on SL through BA was significant:

$\beta = 0.302$, 95% CI [0.217, 0.387], $p < 0.001$.

INTERPRETATION:

Brand Authenticity mediates the relationship between Sustainable Marketing Practices and Student Loyalty. Therefore, H3 is supported.

H4: Moderating Effect of Greenwashing Perception

Using PROCESS Macro (Model 1), the interaction term SMP \times GP was significant:

$\beta = -0.142$, $t = -2.87$, $p = 0.004$.

INTERPRETATION

Greenwashing perception weakens the positive relationship between SMP and BA. Thus, H5 is supported.

MODEL FIT INDICES (SEM – AMOS)

TABLE 8: AUTHOR SELF-CREATED BASED ON ANALYSIS

Fit Index	Recommended Value	Obtained Value	Model Fit
χ^2/df	< 3.00	2.14	Good
CFI	> 0.90	0.946	Good
TLI	> 0.90	0.935	Good
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.045	Acceptable
SRMR	< 0.08	0.041	Acceptable

INTERPRETATION:

The measurement and structural models demonstrate excellent fit, indicating that the proposed conceptual framework is statistically valid.

SUMMARY OF HYPOTHESIS TESTING

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	SMP → Brand Authenticity	Supported
H2	Brand Authenticity → Brand Trust	Supported
H3	BA mediates SMP → Student Loyalty	Supported
H4	GP moderates SMP → Brand Authenticity	Supported

4.2 DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The analysis confirms that sustainable marketing practices play a pivotal role in strengthening brand authenticity and, in turn, enhancing outcomes such as brand trust, student loyalty, and institutional reputation. However, perceptions of greenwashing emerge as a critical barrier, undermining authenticity when sustainability efforts lack credibility or transparency. These findings are consistent with prior research (Girardin, 2024; Hasan et al., 2024; Persakis & Avlonitis, 2025) and underscore the importance of authentic and transparent sustainability communication in building strong and trustworthy higher education brands.

V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**5.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter interprets the study's findings in light of relevant theories and prior research. It examines the relationships among sustainable marketing practices (SMP), brand authenticity (BA), brand trust (BT), and student loyalty (SL), while also considering the moderating role of greenwashing perception (GP). In addition, the chapter outlines the study's theoretical contributions, offers managerial implications for higher education institutions (HEIs), and identifies directions for future research.

5.2 DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS**5.2.1 SUSTAINABLE MARKETING PRACTICES AND BRAND AUTHENTICITY (H1)**

The findings demonstrate a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between sustainable marketing practices and brand authenticity ($\beta = 0.621$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that higher education institutions that engage in environmentally and socially responsible marketing are more likely to be perceived as authentic by students. These results are consistent with prior studies (Girardin, 2024; Bulmer, 2024), which highlight that sustainability-oriented marketing enhances credibility and reinforces alignment between institutional values and actions. Moreover, the findings support Authentic Branding Theory by confirming that transparency and ethical responsibility play a central role in strengthening perceptions of brand genuineness.

5.2.2 BRAND AUTHENTICITY AND BRAND TRUST (H2)

The results indicate a significant positive relationship between brand authenticity and brand trust ($\beta = 0.672$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that higher levels of perceived authenticity led to stronger trust among stakeholders. This finding is consistent with Campagna et al. (2023), who emphasise that authenticity grounded in consistency and honesty enhances stakeholder confidence. In the context of higher education institutions, trust is strengthened when students perceive sustainability communications as sincere and reflective of genuine institutional commitment rather than purely promotional efforts.

5.2.3 BRAND AUTHENTICITY AND STUDENT LOYALTY (H3)

Brand authenticity also exerts a significant positive influence on student loyalty ($\beta = 0.643$, $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that when higher education institutions genuinely embody and enact sustainable values, students are more likely to remain engaged with their institution and to advocate on its behalf. The result is consistent with Hasan et al. (2024), who report that sustainability-oriented practices strengthen students' emotional attachment and advocacy behaviours. In this sense, brand authenticity shifts students from passive recipients of education to active ambassadors of the university brand.

5.2.4 MEDIATION OF BRAND AUTHENTICITY BETWEEN SMP AND STUDENT LOYALTY (H4)

Brand authenticity was found to significantly mediate the relationship between sustainable marketing practices and student loyalty ($\beta = 0.302$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that sustainability initiatives influence student loyalty primarily through the development of perceived authenticity. This finding aligns with Stakeholder Theory, which emphasises that genuine and value-driven actions foster stakeholder alignment and long-term relational outcomes. It suggests that higher education institutions must move beyond superficial sustainability messaging and engage in authentic, values-based communication to build trust, emotional connection, and sustained student loyalty.

5.3 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

1. EXTENSION OF AUTHENTIC BRANDING THEORY:

The study empirically validates that sustainable marketing practices strengthen brand authenticity, confirming authenticity as a mediating mechanism in the sustainability–brand relationship.

2. CONTRIBUTION TO STAKEHOLDER THEORY:

The results highlight how HEIs can align their sustainability efforts with stakeholder expectations, creating mutual trust and loyalty.

3. MODEL DEVELOPMENT FOR HEIS:

The proposed conceptual framework integrates sustainability, authenticity, and brand reputation—offering a holistic model for understanding marketing effectiveness in the education sector.

5.4 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

1. STRATEGIC INTEGRATION OF SUSTAINABILITY:

HEIs should embed sustainability into their core marketing strategy beyond symbolic gestures—to ensure genuine alignment between values and actions.

2. TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION:

Institutions must use evidence-based sustainability reporting to reduce scepticism and prevent greenwashing perceptions.

3. BUILDING BRAND AUTHENTICITY:

Marketing campaigns should focus on real stories of impact, ethical initiatives, and student participation to strengthen authenticity.

4. ENHANCING STUDENT LOYALTY:

Institutions can use sustainable brand positioning to foster student pride, advocacy, and alumni engagement.

5. MONITORING PUBLIC PERCEPTION:

Regular audits of stakeholder perceptions can help HEIs identify areas where sustainability communication may appear disingenuous.

5.5 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

- Curriculum Alignment: Integrate UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into academic programs to reinforce authenticity.
- Campus Initiatives: Promote green operations and community projects that students can observe and participate in.
- Digital Engagement: Use social media and institutional websites to transparently share sustainability data and success stories.
- Collaborations: Partner with NGOs or sustainable enterprises to demonstrate real-world commitment.

5.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. The study relied on self-reported survey data, which may introduce social desirability bias.
2. The research was cross-sectional, limiting causal inference.
3. It was conducted within a specific geographic context, so results may not generalize globally.
4. The study focused primarily on **student perceptions**, excluding faculty, alumni, and administrative perspectives.

5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Conduct longitudinal studies to measure changes in authenticity and loyalty over time.
2. Incorporate qualitative interviews to explore deeper psychological factors influencing authenticity perception.

3. Expand to cross-cultural comparisons among universities in different regions.
4. Investigate other moderators, such as digital engagement or institutional ranking, in the sustainability–authenticity link.
5. Explore faculty and alumni perceptions to gain a holistic understanding of institutional authenticity.

5.8 CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that sustainable marketing practices play a critical role in enhancing brand authenticity and strengthening trust, loyalty, and institutional reputation in higher education. When sustainability communication is grounded in genuine and verifiable actions, it fosters stakeholder trust and supports long-term institutional success. In contrast, greenwashing behaviours undermine authenticity and pose significant reputational risks.

Overall, the findings highlight that brand authenticity cannot be achieved through marketing rhetoric alone, but through consistent alignment between institutional values, practices, and communication. For higher education institutions operating in an increasingly values-driven educational marketplace, authentic sustainability represents not only an ethical responsibility but also a strategic imperative for sustainable competitive advantage.

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