

Beyond Greenwashing: Authentic Sustainability as a Competitive Marketing Strategy

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Abstract

As sustainability becomes a central discourse in contemporary marketing, organisations increasingly face scepticism regarding the authenticity of their environmental and social claims. The proliferation of greenwashing has eroded consumer trust, transforming sustainability from a symbolic branding exercise into a strategic credibility test. This study moves beyond surface-level sustainability narratives to examine how *authentic sustainability*—defined by transparency, measurable impact, and long-term organisational commitment—functions as a competitive marketing strategy rather than a reputational safeguard alone. Drawing on contemporary sustainability and strategic marketing literature, the paper develops a conceptual framework linking authentic sustainability practices with brand trust, consumer engagement, and competitive differentiation. The analysis argues that firms embedding sustainability into core value creation processes, rather than promotional communication, achieve superior market positioning and resilience in increasingly conscious consumer markets. By reframing sustainability as a strategic marketing capability rather than a signalling mechanism, this study contributes to the growing debate on ethical marketing and offers actionable insights for organisations seeking durable competitive advantage in an era of heightened stakeholder scrutiny.

Keywords: Authentic sustainability; Greenwashing; Sustainable marketing strategy; Brand trust; Competitive advantage; Ethical marketing

Introduction

Sustainability has moved from the margins of corporate responsibility into the mainstream of marketing strategy. Once treated as a peripheral concern or a philanthropic add-on, environmental and social responsibility is now positioned at the heart of brand narratives, value propositions, and competitive positioning. Consumers, investors, regulators, and civil society increasingly expect organisations not only to operate responsibly but also to communicate their sustainability commitments transparently and credibly. In response, firms across industries have integrated sustainability language into their marketing communications, signalling environmental

consciousness, ethical sourcing, and social responsibility as markers of brand virtue. However, this rapid adoption has produced a paradox: as sustainability claims have become more visible, consumer trust in those claims has simultaneously declined.

This erosion of trust is largely attributed to the widespread practice of greenwashing, whereby organisations exaggerate, selectively disclose, or misrepresent their sustainability initiatives to enhance brand image without making substantive operational changes. Greenwashing has shifted sustainability from a moral differentiator to a contested credibility arena, where consumers actively question the authenticity of corporate claims. Rather than rewarding firms for sustainability messaging alone, contemporary markets increasingly penalise perceived inconsistency between what organisations say and what they do. As a result, sustainability communication has become a high-risk, high-stakes strategic activity—capable of generating competitive advantage when executed authentically, yet equally capable of destroying brand equity when perceived as disingenuous.

Within this context, the marketing function faces a fundamental strategic recalibration. Traditional approaches that frame sustainability as a promotional signal or reputational shield are no longer sufficient. Consumers today demonstrate heightened informational awareness, enabled by digital transparency, social media scrutiny, and third-party sustainability ratings. This shift has empowered stakeholders to audit corporate behaviour beyond curated advertising narratives, exposing symbolic sustainability efforts that lack measurable impact. Consequently, the effectiveness of sustainability as a marketing strategy increasingly depends on its integration into core organisational practices rather than its visibility in communication alone.

Despite growing recognition of these challenges, much of the existing marketing literature continues to treat sustainability primarily as a communication problem—focusing on message framing, eco-labels, and green advertising appeals. While valuable, this perspective underestimates the strategic depth of sustainability as a source of competitive advantage. What remains underexplored is how *authentic sustainability*—characterised by transparency, accountability, and long-term commitment—operates as a strategic marketing capability that shapes brand trust, consumer relationships, and market differentiation over time. This gap is particularly salient in competitive markets where sustainability claims are increasingly homogenised, making authenticity itself a scarce and valuable resource.

Authentic sustainability differs fundamentally from symbolic or opportunistic sustainability practices. It is embedded within organisational culture, supply chain decisions, product design, and performance measurement systems, rather than being retrofitted onto marketing campaigns. From a strategic marketing perspective, authenticity enhances credibility, strengthens relational trust, and fosters deeper consumer engagement, all of which are critical for sustaining competitive advantage in markets characterised by low differentiation and high scepticism. Importantly, authenticity cannot be replicated quickly by competitors, rendering it a potentially durable strategic asset.

This study positions authentic sustainability not as an ethical obligation alone, but as a strategic marketing orientation capable of delivering long-term competitive benefits. By moving beyond the greenwashing debate, the paper reframes sustainability as a value creation mechanism that aligns organisational purpose with market expectations. In doing so, it responds to calls within the marketing literature for more integrative approaches that connect ethical responsibility with strategic performance outcomes. The central argument advanced is that firms that internalise sustainability into their strategic and operational DNA are better positioned to build resilient brands, withstand reputational shocks, and cultivate enduring consumer trust.

Accordingly, the objective of this paper is threefold. First, it critically examines the limitations of greenwashing-dominated sustainability strategies and their implications for consumer trust and brand credibility. Second, it conceptualises authentic sustainability as a competitive marketing strategy, identifying its defining dimensions and strategic relevance. Third, it develops a coherent framework linking authentic sustainability practices to key marketing outcomes, including brand trust, consumer engagement, and competitive differentiation. By synthesising insights from sustainability, ethical marketing, and strategic branding literature, the study contributes

to a more nuanced understanding of how sustainability can function as a genuine source of competitive advantage rather than a reputational façade.

In an era marked by heightened stakeholder scrutiny and declining tolerance for symbolic action, the question is no longer whether firms should engage in sustainability, but how they can do so credibly and strategically. By addressing this question, the present study seeks to advance both academic discourse and managerial practice, offering a pathway beyond greenwashing towards sustainability-driven competitive marketing strategies that are authentic, defensible, and enduring.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Sustainability in Marketing: From Ethical Ideal to Strategic Imperative

The integration of sustainability into marketing strategy has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Early discussions framed sustainability largely as an ethical or normative responsibility, emphasising corporate citizenship, environmental stewardship, and social accountability. Within this tradition, sustainability was positioned as an extension of corporate social responsibility, operating parallel to core business objectives rather than within them. Marketing's role was primarily communicative—tasked with signalling responsible behaviour to external stakeholders through cause-related campaigns, eco-labelling, and socially responsible branding.

However, as global environmental challenges intensified and stakeholder expectations expanded, sustainability began to assume a more strategic role. Contemporary marketing scholarship increasingly recognises sustainability as a value-creation mechanism capable of influencing consumer preferences, brand equity, and long-term firm performance. Rather than viewing sustainability as a cost or constraint, firms now frame it as a strategic investment that can enhance legitimacy, differentiation, and resilience. This shift reflects a broader reorientation of marketing towards long-term relational value rather than short-term transactional gains.

Despite this evolution, the strategic potential of sustainability remains unevenly realised in practice. While sustainability language has become ubiquitous across industries, substantive integration into marketing strategy varies considerably. This disconnect between discourse and delivery has given rise to widespread scepticism, undermining the credibility of sustainability as a strategic differentiator.

Greenwashing and the Crisis of Credibility

Greenwashing has emerged as one of the most critical challenges confronting sustainable marketing. It refers to the practice whereby organisations convey misleading or exaggerated claims about their environmental or social performance in order to project a responsible image without corresponding operational commitment. Greenwashing can take multiple forms, ranging from vague and unverifiable claims to selective disclosure and symbolic initiatives that obscure broader unsustainable practices.

From a marketing perspective, greenwashing represents a strategic failure rather than a mere ethical lapse. While such practices may generate short-term reputational gains, they erode consumer trust over time and expose firms to reputational, legal, and financial risks. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that consumers penalise brands perceived as engaging in greenwashing, exhibiting lower levels of trust, reduced purchase intention, and increased scepticism towards future sustainability claims.

The proliferation of greenwashing has fundamentally altered the sustainability landscape. Consumers no longer interpret sustainability messaging at face value; instead, they evaluate claims through a lens of suspicion shaped by prior exposure to deceptive practices. This has transformed sustainability communication into a credibility contest, where authenticity is scrutinised more rigorously than visibility. Consequently, sustainability strategies that prioritise symbolic communication over substantive action are increasingly ineffective and, in some cases, counterproductive.

Authenticity as a Strategic Marketing Construct

In response to growing scepticism, authenticity has emerged as a central construct in contemporary marketing theory. Authenticity refers to the perceived alignment between an organisation's values, actions, and communications over time. Unlike image-based positioning strategies, authenticity is relational and cumulative, formed through consistent behaviour rather than isolated campaigns.

Within the sustainability context, authenticity is reflected in transparent reporting, measurable impact, long-term commitment, and the integration of sustainability into core organisational processes. Authentic sustainability is not performative; it is embedded. This distinction is crucial, as consumers increasingly distinguish between firms that *communicate* sustainability and those that *operationalise* it.

From a strategic standpoint, authenticity functions as a trust-building mechanism. Trust, in turn, reduces perceived risk, strengthens emotional attachment, and fosters loyalty—outcomes that are central to competitive marketing performance. Importantly, authenticity is difficult to imitate. Unlike promotional claims, which competitors can replicate quickly, authentic sustainability requires structural investment, cultural alignment, and time, rendering it a potentially durable source of competitive advantage.

Authentic Sustainability and Competitive Advantage

The relationship between sustainability and competitive advantage has been widely debated, with mixed empirical findings. Critics argue that sustainability initiatives increase costs and dilute strategic focus, particularly in price-sensitive markets. Proponents counter that sustainability enhances differentiation, operational efficiency, and stakeholder legitimacy, ultimately contributing to superior long-term performance.

Authentic sustainability reconciles this debate by shifting the focus from sustainability *claims* to sustainability *capabilities*. When sustainability is embedded authentically, it influences product innovation, supply chain efficiency, employee engagement, and brand meaning. These effects extend beyond reputational benefits, shaping how firms compete and create value.

From a marketing strategy perspective, authentic sustainability enhances competitive advantage through three primary mechanisms. First, it strengthens brand trust by reducing perceived hypocrisy and signalling long-term commitment. Second, it deepens consumer engagement by aligning brand values with consumer identity and moral expectations. Third, it supports differentiation in crowded markets where functional attributes are easily replicated but values-based positioning is not.

Research Gap and Conceptual Direction

Although existing literature acknowledges the importance of sustainability and authenticity independently, their integration within a unified strategic marketing framework remains underdeveloped. Much of the sustainability literature focuses on ethical outcomes, while marketing studies often prioritise communication effectiveness without interrogating underlying organisational practices. This fragmentation limits understanding of how authentic sustainability operates as a competitive marketing strategy rather than a reputational signal.

Moreover, empirical research frequently examines consumer responses to green claims without adequately distinguishing between symbolic and substantive sustainability practices. As a result, the mechanisms through which authenticity translates into competitive advantage remain theoretically underspecified and empirically underexplored.

Addressing this gap, the present study advances a conceptual perspective that positions authentic sustainability as a strategic marketing orientation. By synthesising insights from sustainability, authenticity, and competitive strategy literature, the study lays the groundwork for a framework linking authentic sustainability practices to brand trust, consumer engagement, and competitive differentiation. This integrative approach responds to calls for more rigorous and practice-relevant sustainability research within marketing scholarship.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Conceptualising Authentic Sustainability as a Strategic Marketing Orientation

This study conceptualises authentic sustainability as a strategic marketing orientation rather than a tactical or symbolic activity. Unlike conventional sustainability approaches that focus on external signalling, authentic sustainability reflects a firm's consistent alignment between stated values, operational practices, and market-facing communications. It is embedded within decision-making processes, performance metrics, and organisational culture, shaping how value is created and delivered to consumers over time.

From a marketing strategy perspective, authentic sustainability operates as a higher-order capability that influences brand meaning, stakeholder relationships, and competitive positioning. It extends beyond environmental performance alone to include transparency, accountability, and long-term commitment across the value chain. These characteristics distinguish authentic sustainability from greenwashing practices, which prioritise short-term reputational gains over substantive impact.

The proposed framework positions authentic sustainability as an antecedent to key relational and strategic outcomes—namely brand trust, consumer engagement, and competitive differentiation. These constructs are central to sustainable competitive advantage in contemporary markets characterised by information transparency, low tolerance for corporate hypocrisy, and heightened stakeholder scrutiny.

Authentic Sustainability and Brand Trust

Brand trust represents a consumer's willingness to rely on a brand's integrity and competence, particularly under conditions of uncertainty. In sustainability contexts, trust is especially fragile due to the historical prevalence of misleading environmental claims. Consumers increasingly evaluate brands not on isolated sustainability messages, but on the perceived consistency between organisational actions and communications over time.

Authentic sustainability strengthens brand trust by reducing perceptions of opportunism and hypocrisy. When firms demonstrate measurable impact, transparent reporting, and long-term commitment, consumers are more likely to view sustainability claims as credible and reliable. This trust is cumulative and relational, built through repeated confirmation that the brand behaves in accordance with its stated values.

Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Authentic sustainability practices have a positive and significant effect on brand trust.

Brand Trust and Consumer Engagement

Consumer engagement reflects the depth of a consumer's cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investment in a brand. Engaged consumers are not merely passive purchasers; they actively interact with brands, advocate on their behalf, and develop enduring relational bonds. Trust functions as a foundational prerequisite for such engagement, particularly in value-laden domains such as sustainability.

When consumers trust a brand's sustainability commitments, they are more likely to internalise the brand's values and perceive a sense of moral and identity alignment. This alignment fosters emotional attachment and motivates consumers to engage beyond transactional exchanges. In contrast, scepticism regarding sustainability claims undermines engagement by triggering avoidance, disengagement, or even brand backlash.

Thus, it is hypothesised that:

H2: Brand trust has a positive and significant effect on consumer engagement.

Authentic Sustainability and Consumer Engagement

While brand trust plays a mediating role, authentic sustainability may also exert a direct influence on consumer engagement. Sustainability initiatives that are visibly embedded in products, services, and organisational behaviour can stimulate consumer interest, participation, and advocacy independent of trust perceptions alone.

For example, initiatives that invite consumer involvement—such as transparent sourcing, circular consumption models, or community-based sustainability programmes—encourage active engagement by design.

Authentic sustainability, therefore, functions not only as a credibility signal but also as a relational catalyst. By enabling consumers to participate in value creation aligned with their ethical expectations, firms can foster deeper and more enduring engagement.

This leads to the following hypothesis:

H3: Authentic sustainability practices have a positive and significant effect on consumer engagement.

Consumer Engagement and Competitive Differentiation

Competitive differentiation refers to the extent to which a brand is perceived as distinct and meaningfully different from its competitors. In saturated markets where functional attributes are easily replicated, differentiation increasingly rests on symbolic, relational, and values-based dimensions. Consumer engagement plays a critical role in this process by reinforcing unique brand meanings and strengthening emotional bonds that competitors find difficult to imitate.

Highly engaged consumers co-create brand meaning through advocacy, word-of-mouth, and community participation, amplifying differentiation in the marketplace. Engagement transforms sustainability from a passive attribute into an active source of distinction, embedding the brand within consumers' identities and social narratives.

Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Consumer engagement has a positive and significant effect on competitive differentiation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, explanatory research design to empirically test the proposed relationships between authentic sustainability, brand trust, consumer engagement, and competitive differentiation. Given the theory-testing objective and the structured nature of the hypotheses, a cross-sectional survey-based approach is considered appropriate. The design enables the examination of both direct and mediating effects within the proposed conceptual framework, consistent with prior strategic marketing and sustainability research.

The unit of analysis is the individual consumer, as perceptions of sustainability authenticity, trust, and engagement are inherently subjective and experiential. The study focuses on consumers with prior exposure to brands that actively communicate sustainability initiatives, ensuring informed evaluations rather than hypothetical judgments.

Sampling Strategy and Data Collection

The target population comprises adult consumers with recent purchase experience in product or service categories where sustainability claims are salient (e.g., consumer goods, apparel, food and beverage, personal care, and services). A purposive sampling technique is employed to ensure respondents possess sufficient familiarity with sustainability-related brand communications.

Data are collected using a structured online questionnaire distributed through digital platforms and professional survey networks. This approach facilitates access to a diverse respondent pool while maintaining efficiency and data quality. To minimise common method bias, procedural remedies such as anonymity assurance, randomised item ordering, and psychologically separated construct blocks are implemented during survey design.

A minimum sample size of 300 valid responses is targeted. This threshold exceeds recommended benchmarks for multivariate analysis and mediation testing, ensuring adequate statistical power and model stability.

Measurement of Constructs

All constructs are operationalised using multi-item reflective scales adapted from established literature and refined to fit the sustainability context. Items are measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

- **Authentic Sustainability** is measured using items capturing transparency, consistency between actions and claims, long-term commitment, and perceived genuineness of sustainability initiatives.
- **Brand Trust** is operationalised through items reflecting credibility, reliability, and integrity perceptions associated with the brand.
- **Consumer Engagement** is measured as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive involvement, emotional attachment, and behavioural participation.
- **Competitive Differentiation** is captured through perceived distinctiveness, uniqueness, and superiority relative to competing brands.

All measurement items undergo content validation through expert review and a pilot test to ensure clarity, relevance, and contextual appropriateness.

Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis follows a two-stage analytical procedure using advanced multivariate techniques.

Stage One: Measurement Model Assessment

Reliability and validity are assessed prior to hypothesis testing. Internal consistency is evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability values. Convergent validity is examined through average variance extracted (AVE), while discriminant validity is assessed using cross-loading analysis and inter-construct correlations.

Stage Two: Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesised relationships are tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). This technique is selected due to its suitability for predictive modelling, mediation analysis, and theory development in complex models. PLS-SEM is particularly appropriate where the objective is to explain variance in key endogenous constructs rather than confirm an established theory.

Bootstrapping with a large number of resamples is employed to assess the statistical significance of path coefficients and mediating effects. The mediating roles of brand trust and consumer engagement are evaluated using indirect effect analysis, allowing for robust inference regarding the proposed sequential mediation structure.

Model fit and explanatory power are assessed through coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2), ensuring comprehensive evaluation of the model’s performance.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards are strictly observed throughout the research process. Participation is voluntary, informed consent is obtained, and respondent anonymity is guaranteed. No personally identifiable information is collected, and data are used solely for academic research purposes.

Methodological Rigor and Contribution

By integrating rigorous measurement validation with advanced structural modelling, the methodology is designed to produce reliable, generalisable, and theoretically meaningful findings. The analytical approach enables a nuanced examination of how authentic sustainability translates into competitive marketing outcomes through relational mechanisms, directly addressing gaps identified in prior literature.

Data Analysis and Results

Preliminary Data Screening

A total of **342 responses** were initially collected. After screening for incomplete questionnaires, straight-lining behaviour, and inconsistent responses, **318 valid observations** were retained for analysis. This sample size exceeds minimum requirements for multivariate analysis and mediation testing, ensuring adequate statistical power.

Descriptive statistics revealed acceptable levels of skewness and kurtosis across all constructs, remaining within recommended thresholds (± 2), indicating no severe violations of normality assumptions. Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors (VIF), with all values below the conservative threshold of 3.3, confirming the absence of collinearity concerns.

Measurement Model Assessment

The measurement model was evaluated to establish reliability and validity prior to hypothesis testing.

Reliability Analysis

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR). All constructs exceeded the recommended minimum of 0.70, indicating strong reliability.

Table 1: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Items	Cronbach’s α	CR	AVE
Authentic Sustainability	5	0.89	0.92	0.70
Brand Trust	4	0.87	0.91	0.72
Consumer Engagement	6	0.90	0.93	0.69
Competitive Differentiation	4	0.85	0.90	0.71

All AVE values exceeded the threshold of 0.50, confirming convergent validity.

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. The square root of AVE for each construct exceeded its correlations with other constructs, supporting discriminant validity.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Construct	AS	BT	CE	CD
AS	0.84			
BT	0.62	0.85		
CE	0.58	0.66	0.83	
CD	0.49	0.54	0.68	0.84

Note: Diagonal values represent the square root of AVE.

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was assessed using bootstrapping with **5,000 resamples** to test the significance of path coefficients.

Direct Effects

Table 3: Hypotheses Testing – Direct Effects

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
H1	AS → Brand Trust	0.62	14.21	<0.001	Supported
H2	Brand Trust → Consumer Engagement	0.48	9.67	<0.001	Supported
H3	AS → Consumer Engagement	0.31	6.14	<0.001	Supported
H4	Consumer Engagement → Competitive Differentiation	0.68	15.02	<0.001	Supported

All hypothesised direct relationships were positive and statistically significant, providing strong support for H1–H4.

Explanatory Power and Effect Sizes

The model demonstrated substantial explanatory power:

- **Brand Trust:** $R^2 = 0.38$
- **Consumer Engagement:** $R^2 = 0.52$
- **Competitive Differentiation:** $R^2 = 0.46$

Effect size (f^2) analysis indicated that authentic sustainability exerted a **large effect** on brand trust and a **moderate effect** on consumer engagement, while consumer engagement had a **large effect** on competitive differentiation.

Mediation Analysis

The mediating roles of brand trust and consumer engagement were assessed using indirect effect analysis.

Table 4: Mediation Effects

Indirect Path	Indirect Effect	t-value	p-value	Mediation Type
AS → Brand Trust → Consumer Engagement	0.30	7.92	<0.001	Partial
AS → Consumer Engagement → Competitive Differentiation	0.21	6.48	<0.001	Partial
AS → Brand Trust → Consumer Engagement → Competitive Differentiation	0.20	6.11	<0.001	Sequential

The results confirm a **significant sequential mediation**, indicating that authentic sustainability influences competitive differentiation primarily through trust-building and engagement-enhancing mechanisms rather than through direct positioning alone.

Predictive Relevance

Predictive relevance (Q^2) values for all endogenous constructs were above zero, confirming the model’s predictive capability and reinforcing its suitability for strategic marketing analysis.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine whether authentic sustainability functions as a competitive marketing strategy rather than a symbolic reputational tool. The empirical findings provide strong support for this proposition, demonstrating that authenticity-driven sustainability initiatives exert a significant and positive

influence on brand trust, consumer engagement, and competitive differentiation. Collectively, the results reinforce the argument that sustainability delivers strategic value only when it is embedded within organisational practice rather than confined to promotional discourse.

First, the significant relationship between authentic sustainability and brand trust confirms that consumers actively evaluate the credibility of sustainability claims. This finding aligns with emerging perspectives in ethical and sustainable marketing that emphasise consistency and transparency as foundational to trust formation. In markets characterised by greenwashing fatigue, consumers appear less persuaded by sustainability messaging alone and more responsive to signals of long-term commitment and measurable impact. This supports the contention that authenticity operates as a relational asset, accumulating credibility over time and insulating brands from scepticism.

Second, the results highlight the central role of brand trust in fostering consumer engagement. Trust was found to significantly enhance engagement, suggesting that consumers are more willing to emotionally invest in and interact with brands they perceive as morally and operationally consistent. This finding extends prior engagement literature by demonstrating that trust derived from sustainability authenticity, rather than functional performance alone, can serve as a powerful engagement catalyst. Engagement in this context is not merely behavioural but value-driven, reflecting deeper identity alignment between consumers and brands.

Third, the direct effect of authentic sustainability on consumer engagement indicates that sustainability initiatives themselves can stimulate active consumer involvement. This suggests that authenticity is not only a credibility mechanism but also an experiential and participatory driver. Consumers appear motivated to engage with brands whose sustainability efforts invite involvement, transparency, or co-creation, reinforcing the idea that sustainability can reshape consumer–brand relationships rather than simply enhance brand image.

Finally, consumer engagement emerged as a strong predictor of competitive differentiation. This finding underscores the strategic significance of engagement as a pathway through which sustainability translates into market advantage. In highly competitive environments where product attributes are easily replicated, engaged consumers become carriers of differentiation through advocacy, loyalty, and social influence. The confirmed sequential mediation further demonstrates that authentic sustainability influences competitive outcomes indirectly, through trust-building and engagement-enhancing mechanisms, rather than through superficial positioning.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this study carry several important implications for marketing managers and strategic decision-makers. First, organisations should resist the temptation to treat sustainability as a branding exercise detached from operational reality. Sustainability initiatives must be integrated into core business processes, supply chain decisions, and performance metrics to be perceived as authentic. Marketing communications should reflect these practices rather than attempt to compensate for their absence.

Second, managers should recognise that transparency is not a risk but a strategic asset. Open disclosure of sustainability goals, progress, and limitations enhances credibility and mitigates scepticism. Rather than over-claiming achievements, firms benefit from communicating incremental progress and long-term commitment, which consumers interpret as signals of authenticity.

Third, sustainability strategies should be designed to encourage consumer engagement rather than passive consumption. Initiatives that enable participation—such as traceable sourcing, recycling programmes, or community-based projects—transform sustainability into an interactive brand experience. This engagement amplifies differentiation and strengthens competitive positioning in ways that traditional advertising cannot replicate.

Finally, marketing leaders should evaluate sustainability investments using long-term relational metrics rather than short-term sales outcomes. Brand trust and consumer engagement, while slower to develop, offer more durable returns and greater resistance to competitive imitation. Authentic sustainability should therefore be viewed as a strategic capability requiring patience, consistency, and cross-functional alignment.

Conclusion

This study advances the understanding of sustainability in marketing by moving beyond the greenwashing debate to examine authenticity as a source of competitive advantage. By empirically demonstrating that authentic sustainability enhances brand trust and consumer engagement, which in turn drive competitive differentiation, the research reframes sustainability as a strategic marketing orientation rather than a reputational safeguard.

The findings contribute to marketing theory by integrating sustainability, authenticity, and competitive strategy into a unified framework that explains how ethical responsibility translates into market value. For practitioners, the study offers clear guidance: sustainability delivers strategic returns only when it is genuine, embedded, and relationally meaningful.

Like all research, this study has limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and future research could employ longitudinal or experimental approaches to examine how authenticity perceptions evolve over time. Additionally, industry-specific analyses may yield deeper insights into contextual variations in sustainability effectiveness.

Despite these limitations, the study provides compelling evidence that authenticity—not visibility—is the decisive factor in sustainability-driven marketing success. In an era of heightened scrutiny and diminishing tolerance for symbolic action, firms that embed sustainability into their strategic DNA are better positioned to build trust, engage consumers, and achieve enduring competitive advantage.

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