Research Article

Strategic Sustainability in Branding: A Grounded Theory Approach to Developing a Sustainable Branding Model in Ports

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ABSTRACT

Committing to sustainability in all its dimensions is crucial in port operations. This commitment enhances stakeholder perceptions and supports branding efforts that integrate sustainability strategies. Sustainable branding is increasingly critical for all industries seeking a competitive advantage in global trade; thus, this research aims to construct a comprehensive framework for sustainable branding in ports, utilizing strategic sustainability principles. Sustainable branding extends beyond the advantages of day-to-day operations and integrates sustainability into the brand's core identity and stakeholder interactions. The study examined the intricacies of sustainable branding practices using a qualitative, exploratory approach and grounded theory methodology. This study investigates the mechanisms behind sustainable branding through interviews with twenty-six experts in the port sector. These experts were selected using purposive sampling based on their extensive knowledge of branding and sustainability. Ultimately, the research results in a theory that defines pragmatic sustainable branding as a reciprocal relationship, where sustainability acts as a fundamental basis, and branding initiatives are propelled forward. This theory provides insight into how ports can strategically utilize sustainable branding and adds to the broader discussion on sustainable port management.

1. Introduction

Sustainable branding has emerged as a vital strategic priority for business-to-business (B2B) enterprises in the global market, and the significance of sustainability has experienced substantial growth. According to Vesal et al. (2021), companies in the modern era must ensure that their goals, values, and mission align with sustainability principles. According to Sheth & Sinha (2015), sustainability has become a fundamental business ideology that influences how stakeholders perceive a company and how consumers make decisions (Erdil, 2013). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating
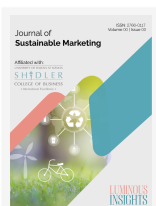
this trend by requiring the implementation of sustainable strategies and the development of innovative business processes (Verma & Gustafsson, 2020).

Several studies have demonstrated that brands significantly influence companies' marketing strategies. Notably, Czinkota et al. (2014), Grubor & Milovanov (2017), and Gupta & Kumar (2013) have all observed a strengthening association between sustainability and branding. Cawsey & Rowley (2016) and Leek & Christodoulides (2011) assert that branding in the B2B sector poses distinctive obstacles, such as the requirement for enduring relationships and a greater level of knowledge and expertise. However, as Kumar & Christodoulopoulou (2014) and Kapitan et al. (2019) state, companies can differentiate themselves from competitors and establish enduring connections with environmentally aware customers by incorporating sustainability into their branding strategy.

Among the B2B companies that need to integrate sustainability strategies in their branding are B2B companies active in ports (Tessmann & Elbert, 2022). Ports, for example, are strategically located at crucial intersections of global commerce, environmental stewardship, and community engagement, underscoring the significant impact of sustainable branding in this industry. However, there is a scarcity of studies examining the long-term branding of B2B relationships (Chan et al., 2012; Davis et al., 2008; Kinnunen et al., 2022; Truong et al., 2021), particularly within the port industry, despite the significance of these connections. Previous literature dealing with green ports primarily deals with single spot measure, while literature dealing more comprehensively with sustainability in the B2B context is less common (Lavissiere et al., 2020). Motivated by the scarcity of studies on port sustainability records (Lim et al., 2019), this research is initiated. Besides, when it comes to ports, there needs to be more sustainable branding strategies and their long-term consequences (Alipour et al., 2023). Thus, this study seeks to fill that void by developing a model for future testing grounded in strategic sustainability and examining the intricacies of sustainable branding in ports. The emphasis on ports underscores the significance and urgency of our research objective, and it

underscores the necessity for innovative approaches to establish a sustainable brand that considers the distinct opportunities and challenges faced by the industry.

2. Theoretical Contribution

For managers of B2B companies in ports engaged in sustainable branding – either involved in building a sustainable corporate brand or hoping to revitalize their existing sustainability-based brands – this study also offers important insights:

Branding models have evolved and addressed sustainability and corporate social responsibility issues. Sustainable branding based on strategic sustainability expresses a strategic attitude and a holistic approach. Special attention is paid to sustainability principles in a brand's business model, values , and actions. Past literature has considered sustainable branding with a particular focus on the consumer market segment, but there are no studies on sustainable branding in B2B firms, particularly ports (Chan et al., 2012; Davis et al., 2008; Torres et al., 2012; Truong et al., 2021). In ports, where B2B companies operate, sustainable branding based on strategic sustainability requires identifying the specific needs of this sector and applying appropriate tools to create a strong brand that includes sustainability at the core of its strategy, in the sense that sustainable branding in ports should not only be a slogan but should be accompanied by real, provable, and tangible actions. It is necessary to continuously include sustainability in the critical processes of the port, such as design, construction, and executive operations, which will enable sustainability in competitive and performance-level strategies and ultimately create a sustainable brand. Therefore, unlike past research that has focused on one aspect of strategic sustainability (Borland, 2009; Dmitrieva et al., 2021; Garza, 2013; Gupta & Kumar, 2013; Hallstedt et al., 2013; Yao et al., 2021; Zameer et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2011), this research examines strategic sustainability with a holistic view.

Another theoretical contribution related to the sustainable branding of ports based on strategic sustainability is the importance of chain performance, which shows that ports alone cannot implement sustainable

branding, and sustainable branding requires the active participation of the entire value chain in the sustainability plan. Therefore, it identifies the cooperation of local stakeholders, creating a strong visual identity and improving the image and identity of the brand as a part of branding activities. A port can only achieve sustainability in cooperation with other companies and local stakeholders in ports. This situation emphasizes the need to focus on strategic sustainability and effective interaction with companies within the supply chain to achieve sustainability goals.

3. Literature Review

This section will comprehensively analyze the theoretical foundation and examine current viewpoints regarding port authorities' and businesses' adoption of sustainable branding strategies.

3.1. Maritime Transport's Journey Towards Sustainability

The marine transportation industry is crucial to global supply chains, fostering economic expansion in various regions worldwide. The volumes of trade transported by sea have significantly increased due to the process of globalization and the use of containers. Clark et al. (2004) and UNCTAD (2018) have reported that shipping is responsible for more than 80% of global goods transportation. Marine transportation plays a vital role in global trade. However, it has negative consequences such as air and water pollution, loss of biodiversity, and health and safety concerns for the general public (Corbett & Winebrake, 2007; Notteboom & Rodrigue, 2005; Yang & Chen, 2016). Despite being considered less environmentally damaging per kilometer traveled compared to other modes of transportation, marine transport is still subject to this concern.

According to Alzahrani (2022), expanding port infrastructure to meet growing demands worsens these environmental issues, making it challenging to implement sustainable management practices. The recent literature has highlighted the growing awareness of global sustainability issues faced by ports. According to Yang et al. (2013) and Hou & Geerlings (2016), integrating sustainability into management strategies and operational practices is the most effective approach to enhancing sustainability

performance. Peris-Mora et al. (2005), Chiu et al. (2014), Asgari et al. (2015), Videira et al. (2012), and Kim & Chiang (2017) are authors who have researched the impact of sustainability dimensions on the economic performance of ports. They have approached this topic from various perspectives, including performance measurement, management, and the relationship between sustainability dimensions. Moreover, this compilation of works explores port sustainability from various perspectives.

Ports have multifaceted functions that encompass both social and economic aspects. However, they are also complex systems where numerous local and global factors interplay. Abood (2007) and Dinwoodie et al. (2012) have identified multiple factors that influence port operational management strategies. These factors encompass the dimensions, proprietorship, regulations, management, and collaboration among interested parties of the port. Geographical location is one of these characteristics. Academic research on port sustainability has examined various subjects, such as the ecological consequences of port logistics systems, the environmental expenses of shipping operations, and the effectiveness of legislative and political structures for managing environmental issues in ports (Gilman, 2003; Martinsen & Björklund, 2012; Psaraftis, 2016).

Incorporating environmental management factors into port operations is essential for complying with regulations, policies, and guidelines related to sustainable development. Beleya et al. (2015) and Vaio et al. (2018) are conducting studies exploring methods such as waste oil processing, emission reduction, and improving energy efficiency to enhance environmental performance. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in research on green strategies and measures about interactions with the port hinterland and the larger port community. This trend reflects the growing recognition of the importance of sustainability in port operations, as highlighted by studies conducted by Aregall et al. (2018) and Puig et al. (2015).

The central government controls specific ports, while others operate under different models, either fully or partially privatized. The governance structure of these ports varies worldwide. Ports should strive

to maximize operational efficiency and productivity by considering economic, environmental, and social considerations. This recommendation remains valid regardless of the organizational structure they utilize. To achieve the critical goal of sustainable economic growth for port authorities, it is essential to make investments that prioritize long-*term sustainability rather than short-term gains. This conclusion is supported by research conducted by Van Den Berg & De Langen (2017) and Tichavska & Tovar (2015). Port officials must, therefore, carefully monitor this delicate balance.

Assessing port performance regarding sustainability is challenging due to the many factors involved. Extensive studies on the sustainability of ports have produced numerous quantitative indicators and assessment methodologies. Some notable examples include the works of Lirn et al. (2013), Puig et al. (2014), and Cheon (2017). The indicators and methods have highlighted the necessity of multidimensional approaches to evaluate the economic efficacy of sustainability objectives. Incorporating digital technologies into port operations and customs procedures enables businesses to enhance their long-term sustainability in the digital age. Digitalization facilitates socially responsible behavior by enabling more streamlined and open financial processes and encouraging innovative taxation and accounting approaches. Digitalization facilitates the tracking of financial transactions. The alterations are modifying the dynamics of global commerce. Thus, it is crucial to examine the impact of digitization on the effectiveness of customs procedures and the sustainability of businesses operating at customs ports (Manita et al., 2020; Mcmanus, 2008; Rukanova et al., 2023).

Furthermore, it is imperative to collaborate with city officials and adopt corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices to ensure the effectiveness of port sustainable development projects that involve engaging with the local community. This collaborative approach seeks to mitigate potential conflicts that may arise due to port expansion by implementing measures such as enhancing the port's corporate responsibility profile and advocating for environmental performance stan-

dards (ISO14001). According to the studies conducted by Daamen & Vries (2013) and Acciaro (2015), engaging with the local community also establishes a sense of trust in the local community. When considering all the opportunities and challenges, sustainable branding becomes a crucial strategic priority in the port industry, particularly in a business-to-business context. Based on thoroughly examining the pertinent literature, sustainability is increasingly influential in shaping corporate strategy and branding. Vesal et al. (2021) and Sheth & Sinha (2015) have highlighted the distinct difficulties and advantages branding presents in the business-to-business industry. However, the port industry still has a considerable distance to cover before its members completely understand the importance of branding in B2B relationships (Casidy & Lie, 2023). This reality underscores the significance of researching sustainable branding in ports and the necessity of developing a model grounded in strategic sustainability.

3.2. The Strategic Intersection of Sustainability and B2B Branding

Empirical research on B2B branding has mainly focused on identifying the implications of B2B brands for organizational purchasing decisions (Bendixen et al., 2004; Wuyts et al., 2009) or firm performance (Homburg et al., 2010; Worm & Srivastava, 2014). However, a review of B2B branding literature reveals that despite the acknowledged role of branding in business markets (Zablah et al., 2010), the literature provides little clarity on the critical drivers of brand performance in B2B markets (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Sheth & Sinha, 2015).

Some marketing research on sustainability focuses on corporate social responsibility or green marketing. This area of research shows that companies are integrating sustainability into their business strategies to influence customer-related outcomes and branding. The focus of these works includes customer satisfaction (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006), customer loyalty (Homburg et al., 2013), company customer identification (Siu et al., 2014), and brand equity in the B2C context (Hsu, 2012; Olsen et al., 2014). The few studies addressing the relationship between sustainability and brand have focused on the B2C context (Pai

et al., 2015; Torres et al., 2012). Recent research shows that emotional factors and individual opinions in a B2B environment cannot be ignored (Gomes et al., 2016). Because emotional factors affect people involved in B2B purchases, individual brand experiences are crucial to B2B purchases. In addition, B2B buyers can feel emotionally secure when purchasing brands with a positive and strong image (Davis et al., 2008; Truong et al., 2021). Providing ethical services and products, as well as companies that show environmental and social concerns, are factors that can change customer behavior. Such outcomes support the need for B2B companies to provide transparent information to their customers about environmental efforts and sustainable products (Martin & Schouten, 2014). Casidy & Lie (2023) also investigated the effects of B2B sustainable brand positioning on relationship outcomes and investigated the vital role of emotional commitment in B2B sustainable brand positioning.

Recent research has studied the concepts of strategic sustainability (Gupta & Kumar, 2013; Yao et al., 2021; Zameer et al., 2020). However, studies have usually investigated the dimensions of strategic sustainability and their effects individually (Broman & Robèrt, 2017; Dmitrieva et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2009; Lacy et al., 2010; Presley et al., 2007; Rocha et al., 2014; Schade & Rothengatter, 2001; Smith, 2011; Telesford & Strachan, 2017), and a comprehensive review of strategic sustainability and sustainable branding has not been done. For example, Zhang et al. (2011) highlighted green marketing as a strategy to improve brand image. Gupta & Kumar (2013) also pointed out the role of marketing in improving a company's competitive position and as an enabler in achieving a better reputation by creating awareness about the benefits of sustainable products and services. Brands often provide the main points of differentiation between competitive offers in marketing, and sustainability as a starting point can be critical to the success of companies (Wood, 2000). When the marketing strategy turns the brand into a valuable stakeholder experience, incorporating sustainability into the marketing strategy will be critical (Mena et al., 2019).

Kinnunen et al. (2022) investigated the effects of strategic sustainability on sustainable performance and brand; they stated that the effects of the four dimensions of strategic sustainability (marketing, business strategy, management, and environmental innovation) increase brand value. The better the company's environmental innovation ability, the more likely a higher brand value will be created. Zameer et al. (2020) presented the relevant role of differentiation strategy through resources and creative work to create value for customers and a strong brand image. They found that the green brand image can make the company the first choice for customers, and the brand image is the result of the company's differentiation strategy. Therefore, creating a green image can strengthen the positive perception of the brand, which causes the formation and strengthening of the company's competitive advantage. Marketing researchers recommend that businesses include sustainability in their communications to promote brand differentiation (Loh & Tan, 2020). Kapitan et al. (2019) also created a sustainable brand positioning scale for B2B companies. While Vesal et al. (2021) reported that sustainability strengthens the brand image of B2B companies, Sheth & Sinha (2015) argue that sustainability is vital for building a brand reputation from company to company in emerging markets. Kumar & Christodoulopoulou (2014) also report a positive relationship between sustainable branding and company performance (Sheth & Sinha, 2015). Weder (2023) also introduced strategic sustainability as a niche construction at the intersection of organizations and their environment.

City branding as a concept was identified by Kavaratzis (2004). Since then, the concepts of place branding and city branding have become popular. By integrating new insights from brand research, critical concepts about place brands such as brand identity and brand image (Anholt, 2008; Govers & Go, 2009), destination branding (Baker, 2007), brand equity (Anholt, 2008), place Placement (Oliveira, 2015), brand identity (Govers & Go, 2009) and brand personality (Aaker, 1997) were developed. Unfortunately, while complex infrastructures such as airports, ports, and railways are used to create a sense of com-

mercial movement, the place branding literature has so far mainly focused on tourism, banking, hospitality, and events (Rutter et al., 2018). Skivko et al. (2023) introduce urban ports as a place for symbolic architecture and a meeting point for sustainable ideas. Baştuğ et al. (2020) also state that seaports must attract and retain customers through marketing activities. This can be achieved by creating a solid brand, communicating correctly with the brand message, and enriching the message with brand personality components for successful positioning.

4. Research Method

The current research adopts a grounded theory approach and a qualitative research strategy. Although the grounded theory is traditionally associated with sociology, nursing, health, and organizational studies, in recent years, it has started to enter marketing and consumer research (Ghorbani et al., 2015; Shanmugathas & Thirunavukkarasu, 2015). This method is well-suited for situations with limited information about a phenomenon. The objective is to construct an explanatory theory that elucidates the underlying processes within the original research area (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Govers & Go, 2009); on the other hand, the initial literature search did not find an established theoretical framework for sustainable branding based on strategic sustainability, indicating a lack of knowledge on the subject.

Grounded theory is a suitable research method for theory development for three reasons. First, it is known for studying human behavior and making knowledge claims about how people interpret reality (Suddaby, 2006). Second, its primary goal is theory building, not theory testing. The grounded theory facilitates the recording and interpretation of people's subjective experiences. The methodological process of theoretical sampling and constant comparison enables the abstraction of people's subjective experiences into theoretical propositions (Fendt & Sachs, 2008). Third, the grounded theory methodology has developed guidelines for conducting research and interpreting data. Therefore, this method was adopted in the current research due to its essential features as a valuable resource.

In this research, the classical approach- evolved and constructivist grounded theory- was used among three methodological approaches (Birks & Mills, 2015). The decision to use a classical grounded theory approach was made because Glaser's approach, with its flexibility, provides the possibility of free exploration of the phenomenon (Urquhart, 2022) so that new concepts and ideas emerge; the analysis of the findings is based on the continuous comparison of the data while continuing the work, which allows the data to guide the flow and inform the development of a core category and the discovery of a theory. The research process is shown in Figure 1 .

The data collection tool employed is semi-structured interviews, and the participants were selected through purposive sampling to identify people who have a deep understanding of the phenomenon (Speziale et al., 2011). Subsequently, theoretical sampling was used to identify other contributors, a technique used to strengthen the collected data and enrich the emerging theory by seeking out individuals with valuable knowledge and experience (Fendt & Sachs, 2008). A total of 26 managers and experts of companies active in Iranian ports were purposefully selected to participate in this research and were interviewed for 9 months. The interviewees were selected according to the following 3 criteria:

1. **Knowledge and Expertise:** Managers and experts who have knowledge and expertise in marketing, social media, brand strategy, and advertising and are familiar with the concepts of branding, sustainable development, and strategic sustainability. Because branding is specialized in marketing, we tried to interview managers who were familiar with this concept (having education related to management and marketing). Before the interview, a brief explanation was given to the participants to ensure further consensus regarding branding and strategic sustainability.
2. **Work experience:** Managers and experts who have worked in ports for at least 5 years and have experience working with all kinds of clients
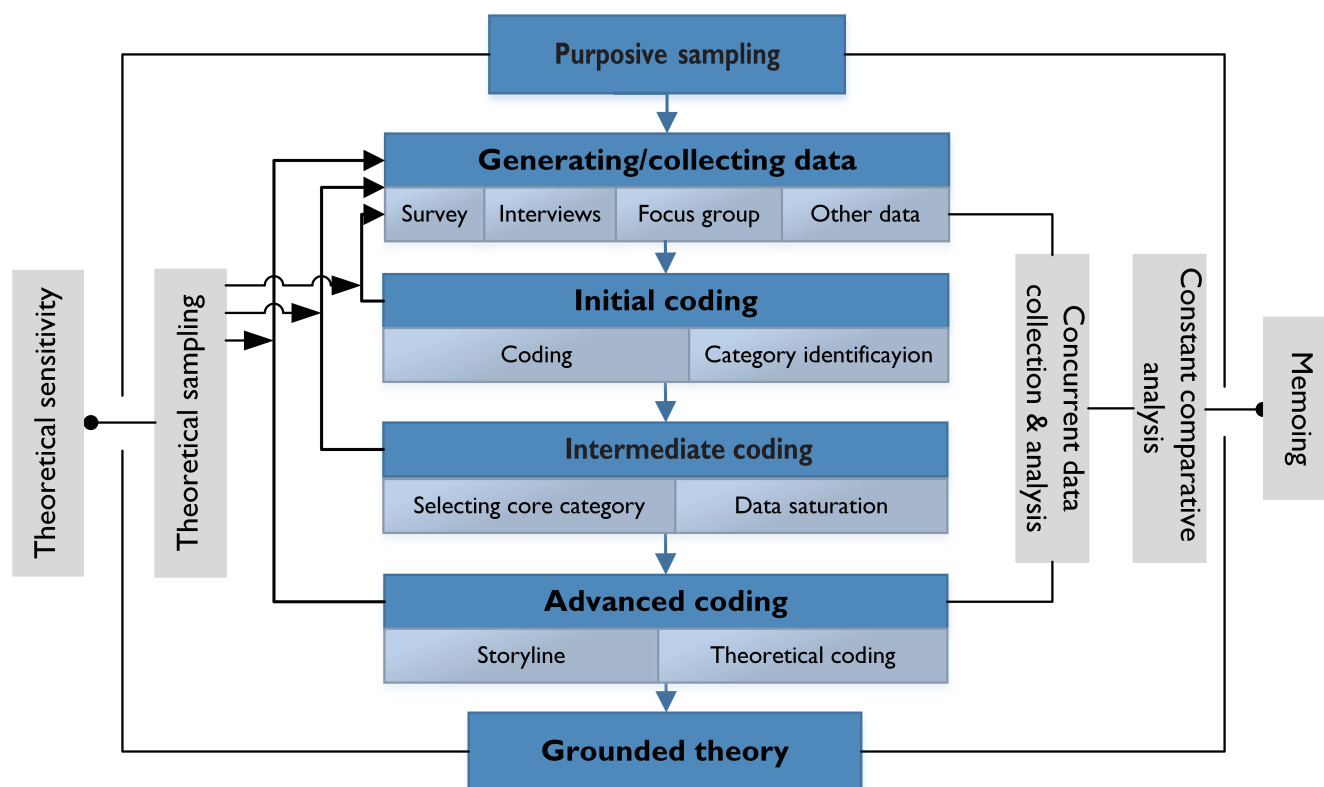
Figure 1. Research Design Framework (Tie et al., 2019)

(for example, commercial, government, and international companies). They are also related to critical stakeholders such as the government, non-governmental organizations, and stakeholders in the field of sustainability.

5. Roles and Responsibilities:

Strategic managers: Strategic managers analyze market trends, develop marketing and branding strategies, and collaborate with other port departments to achieve long-term goals.

Communication Managers: These people are responsible for developing and managing public relations and media management in ports and help promote port companies' brand image.

Operational and logistics managers: Operational and logistics managers supervise the operational aspects of the supply and transfer of goods and play a significant role in managing the supply chain and reducing opera-

tional costs in ports.

Health, Safety, and Environment Managers: This section concerns port safety and environmental laws. These managers are responsible for ensuring compliance with these laws to minimize adverse environmental impacts. The details of the participants are listed in Table 1 .

Data analysis for each section was done immediately after the interview and at the same time as data collection. The researchers were guided to access subsequent data based on the insights gained from the initial data collection and analysis. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation (the point at which no new important insights or information emerged) was reached (Tie et al., 2019). After data analysis, research findings were shared with participants. Participants had the opportunity to review the model and the textual representation of the theory. Their feedback and views were incorporated into the final analysis, enhancing the

Table 1. Characteristics of Contributors

Characteristics	Item	Percentage
Gender	Male	73%
	Female	27%
Knowledge and Expertise	Marketing	76%
	Social Media	80%
	Brand Strategy, Branding	61%
	Sustainable Development	69%
	Advertising	53%
Work experience	5-10 year	19%
	10-15 year	23%
	15-20 year	27%
	20-25 year	31%
Roles and Responsibilities	Strategic managers	23%
	Communication Managers	31%
	Operational and logistics managers	19%
	Health, Safety, and Environment Managers	27%

overall validity and reliability of the research.

6. Results

6.1. Open coding

Following the conclusion of the initial interview, the process of implementing interviews and conducting open coding commenced. Coding, as highlighted by Coyne & Cowley (2006), is a dynamic and reflective procedure involving the assignment of primary conceptual labels to the data. Simultaneously, alongside data collection, constant comparative analysis and memoing were undertaken, serving as integral components of grounded theory (Tie et al., 2019) . These two activities were consistently applied throughout the research and were not confined to this specific stage alone. Through open coding, 368 codes were discerned and organized into 22 subcategories and seven overarching categories. A sample of interviews and their initial codes is presented in Table 2 .

6.2. Selective coding

The research advanced through the application of open codes employing selective coding (Lazenbatt & Elliott, 2005). Glaser (1967), characterizes selective coding as a phase where coding is restricted solely to categories linked to the research problem. This process persists until both the main category and associated categories

reach saturation. The outcomes of selective coding are delineated in Table 3 .

6.3. Theoretical coding

The final stage of coding in the grounded theory method is theoretical coding. This step involves connecting, refining, and formulating theory after the main categories have surfaced (Glaser, 1967). The identification and compilation of theoretical codes become imperative for theory development. These generated theoretical codes conceptualize the relationship between the main category and its associated categories, substantiating an acceptable relationship between the concepts (Glaser, 1967). The codes derived at this stage are pragmatic sustainable branding, branding platform, and branding catalyst. Theoretical coding is specified in Table 4.

6.4. Substantive theory

The formulation of a grounded theory was accomplished through the application of theoretical coding and data classification, constant comparative analysis, and the formulation of conceptual theoretical questions. The theoretical sampling technique, instrumental in shaping the theory, facilitated the exploration of categories, characteristics, and interrelationships indicative of a theoretical whole (Holton & Walsh,

Table 2. Open Coding

Open codes	Quotation
Designing an integrated marketing strategy, standard of sustainability practices	There must be integrity behind the branding. I think the most important thing is that there is a real decision and desire to have a sustainable and responsible company, and the actions are based on that. The role of branding is to add a layer of storytelling and try to ensure that the target audience knows, understands, and is interested in what the company does. It cannot be attached to [sustainability in branding] if there are no real actions behind it, now that most companies in the world are trying to differentiate between sustainability and responsibility issues, this is a kind of challenge. The standard of sustainability measures in ports must be very high to be used as a way of differentiation.
Using recycled and renewable materials, improving the production process and reducing pollutants, waste management, and compliance with ethical principles	To create a sustainable brand, it is necessary to use recycled and renewable materials, improve the production process and reduce pollutants, provide efficient policies for waste management, respect workers' rights and observe ethical principles in updated activities, in this way Introduce a sustainable brand.

2016). Theoretical coding was pivotal in conceptualizing the relationships between main categories and theoretical concepts, providing a comprehensive structure to the emerging theory. The attainment of theoretical saturation signified that the developing categories had reached a saturation point, thereby crystallizing the emerging selectivity theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The present research study led to the following grounded theory:

"For sustainable branding based on strategic sustainability, ports are engaged in pragmatic sustainable branding by providing a platform of sustainability aligned with the branding catalyst."

The sustainable branding model based on strategic sustainability is shown in Figure 2.

7. Discussion

Figure 2 shows the relationship between the theoretical codes. As the model shows, ports must develop three components for sustainable branding based on strategic sustainability: pragmatic sustainable branding, a branding platform, and a branding catalyst.

The theoretical code of the branding platform emphasizes the importance of creating a comprehensive and integrated branding strategy that combines the framework of brand value perception formed inside the company and public diplomacy created outside the company. Companies active in ports can increase their reputation by actively engaging stakeholders, communicating sustainability commitments, creating a strong and reliable brand identity, and considering standards aligned with sustainable development for companies active in ports. Strengthen the company and society and contribute to a more sustainable future. This approach increases brand value and prepares ports to navigate the complexities of sustainability challenges effectively. In addition, according to the traditional branding models such as the Aaker model and the Kapferer model, which respectively have an approach to personality dimensions and brand identity, sustainable branding in companies active in ports visualizes and promotes characteristics that make brands sustainable in environmental, social, and economic contexts. The economic dimensions of this model include the brand's functional benefits for the

Table 3. Selective Coding

Category	Subcategory
Sustainable Digital Networking	Web Design
	Agile Insight
	Organize Digital Content
	Digital Communication
Internal Branding	Brand Mantra
	Horizontal And Vertical Alignment
Brand Value Perception Framework	The Emotional Connection of The Brand
	Brand Legitimacy
	Place Brand Community
	Brand Competitiveness
Public Diplomacy	Policy of Ports
	Supervision
Corporate Social Responsibility	Energy Management
	Environmental Protection
	Education
	Promoting A Culture of Sustainability
Sustainable Entrepreneurship	Green Initiatives
	Capacity Building
	Circular Economy
Sustainable Place Marketing	The Art of Green Positioning
	Integrated Marketing Communications
	Place Brand Implementation

Table 4. Theoretical Coding

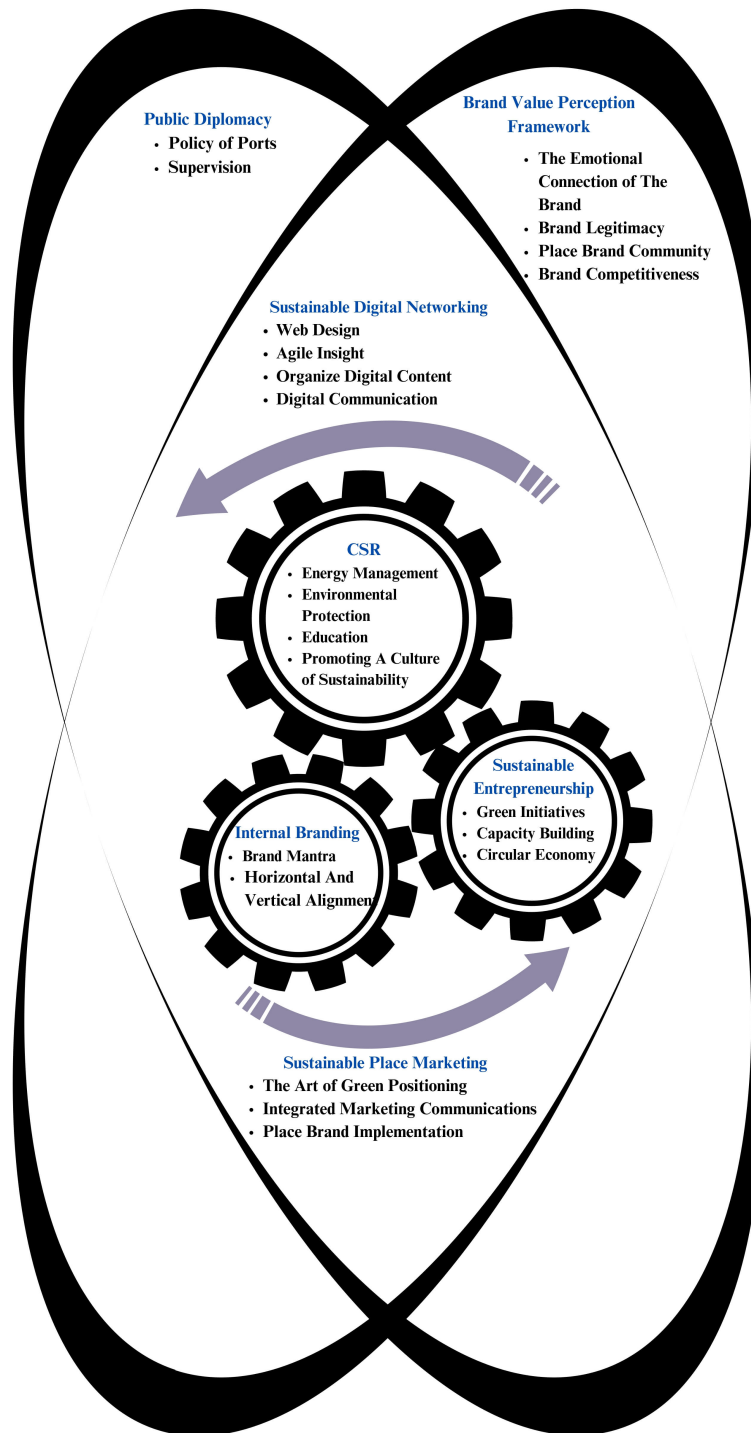|	
pragmatic sustainable branding	Companies active in ports develop sustainable branding throughout ports with internal branding, corporate social responsibility, and sustainable entrepreneurship.
branding platform	Companies active in ports rely on the main brand values based on sustainability by creating a value perception framework. By politicizing, formulating, and requesting sustainability standards from companies active in ports, they seek to create sustainable diplomacy that provides a platform for sustainable branding.
branding catalyst	Sustainable Place Marketing and sustainable digital networking are catalysts to speed up the sustainable branding of ports.

Public Diplomacy
- Policy of Ports
- Supervision

Brand Value Perception Framework
- The Emotional Connection of The Brand
- Brand Legitimacy
- Place Brand Community
- Brand Competitiveness

Sustainable Digital Networking
- Web Design
- Agile Insight
- Organize Digital Content
- Digital Communication

CSR
- Energy Management
- Environmental Protection
- Education
- Promoting A Culture of Sustainability

Sustainable Entrepreneurship
- Green Initiatives
- Capacity Building
- Circular Economy

Internal Branding
- Brand Mantra
- Horizontal And Vertical Alignment

Sustainable Place Marketing
- The Art of Green Positioning
- Integrated Marketing Communications
- Place Brand Implementation

Figure 2. Sustainable Branding Model Based on Strategic Sustainability in Iranian Ports

consumer. However, due to its responsibility and positive effects on society and the environment, traces of the emotional components of the brand (emotional connection of the brand) are also evident.

The theoretical code of pragmatic sustainable branding creates a framework for developing a solid and sustainable brand identity for companies operating in ports. By effectively integrating internal branding, CSR, and sustainable entrepreneurship, these companies can create a brand that appeals to stakeholders and actively contributes to environmental sustainability and social well-being because sustainable entrepreneurship considers companies' capacity to transform ideas into actions that create economic, environmental, and social values, Fosters a resilient brand that aligns internal practices with external perceptions and ensures long-term sustainability and positive community impact in the maritime sector. According to the words of one of the participants in this research, "Sustainable entrepreneurs are required to create an impact on port entrepreneurship, local economy, and social and environmental system by stimulating the formation of port businesses and networks through the acquisition of tangible and intangible resources. Moreover, they are under the influence of investors". In supporting sustainable port entrepreneurship, the circular economy is essential for global sustainability as port entrepreneurship is part of the creative economy. Hence, sustainable port entrepreneurs use marketing to support themselves through creative and cultural activities that may create new businesses and jobs, partnerships, and networks, both for-profit and non-profit.

Branding Catalyst's theoretical code, which incorporates sustainable digital networking and sustainable place marketing, provides a robust framework for strengthening the branding of companies operating in ports. By using digital tools to enhance communication and promote their unique attributes through sustainability-focused marketing, ports can create a strong brand identity. This approach resonates with various stakeholders and aligns port operations with global sustainability goals. Ultimately, these strategies position ports as leaders in sustainable practices and enhance ports' reputation, social relations, and economic potential in an increasingly environmentally conscious market.

According to the model, companies active in ports seek sustainable branding by defining a strategic framework to promote sustainability. In this context, the framework of brand value perception and public diplomacy are considered two basic dimensions imagined in the form of two circles, and the points of commonality between these two are things (internal branding, corporate social responsibility, and sustainable entrepreneurship) that constitute pragmatic sustainable branding.

The process of sustainable branding is based on principles that can be considered in the form of three gears (given that the gear is the symbol of the industry) that operate in the fields of internal branding, corporate social responsibility, and sustainable entrepreneurship in ports. The image of the gear wheel is a symbol of the overlap and internal cooperation between these three areas, which indicates the need for coordination and synergy between them to achieve strategic sustainability goals. With the rotation of each gear, other parts are also activated, and the entire branding system moves. This model proposes that each area is important and influential in realizing a common goal. The research is consistent with previous strategic sustainability and branding studies, presenting a cutting-edge, port-specific framework. It offers pragmatic insights for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to enhance collaboration and sustainability in ports. More studies should investigate its applicability and assess stakeholder perceptions across different regions. Sustainable location marketing and digital networking are essential to this equation and act as drivers or catalysts that further sustainable branding. The arrow symbols above and below the gears indicate that these two elements are important in all branding stages and determine the gears' speed and direction.

Emphasizing that these factors are constantly present throughout the sustainable branding process indicates that sustainability should not be seen as a separate goal or project but should be considered

an essential and continuous component in all port activities, influencing all levels and sectors.

8. Conclusion

This research uncovers a previously unexplored connection between strategic sustainability and sustainable branding in the port sector. This aspect has been surprisingly overlooked despite its crucial significance in B2B marketing. The topic of sustainable branding and strategic sustainability has yet to receive sufficient attention despite its overall importance (Pai et al., 2015; Torres et al., 2012). This holds particularly true in the intricate port setting. Although there is a consensus that marketing is vital in B2B settings, this fact still holds. Prior research has extensively focused on the analysis of various elements of strategic sustainability, as evidenced by studies conducted by Gupta & Kumar (2013), Yao et al. (2021), and Zameer et al. (2020). However, none of the abovementioned studies by Smith (2011) and Dmitrieva et al. (2021) have proposed a comprehensive approach that integrates sustainability, operational efficiency, and strategic foresight. In the dominant approach of port marketing and related green strategies, it is generally observed that green ports implement measures in the short or medium term to address environmental emergencies (Bergqvist & Monios, 2019).

Moreover, actions are focused on one aspect of sustainability (mainly the environmental pillar), mainly on one source of pollution, and involve only a small number of actors (Lavissiere et al., 2020). By offering a port-specific sustainable branding strategy based on strategic sustainability principles, our research seeks to close this knowledge gap. Our understanding of the dynamics in developing contexts, such as Iran, is limited because most B2B branding discussions focus on wealthy nations (Lasrado et al., 2023). This study enhances the current knowledge by shedding light on the strategic necessities of sustainable branding in these neglected regions. This text emphasizes the significant environmental issues resulting from port operations (Axel, 2011). It explores how branding strategies that integrate sustainability can address these issues while generating fresh prospects for leadership and competitive edge.

According to the findings of this study, port managers and CEOs of business-to-business companies should integrate sustainable branding initiatives and strategic sustainability into their operations. However, this strategy is a tool for immediate brand promotion and a strategic investment to ensure long-term performance improvement for port companies. The document emphasizes the need for a framework that surpasses conventional marketing slogans. It also emphasizes the importance of demonstrating a strong dedication to sustainability in all port operations. Smith (2011) and Dmitrieva et al. (2021) argue that ports should proactively cultivate enduring relationships with their stakeholders by openly communicating their sustainability objectives and principles. Furthermore, the study indicates that ports must collaborate with other stakeholders throughout the entire value chain and synchronize their internal operations with sustainability objectives to achieve success in sustainable branding. Collaboration is essential for creating a sustainable brand that fulfills stakeholders' and customers' ethical and ecological expectations.

To ensure adherence to sustainability goals, companies should implement indicators and performance measurement tools to assess the progress of their sustainable strategies and actively communicate values to customers and other stakeholders by promoting environmental and social responsibilities. Ports can effectively convince customers of the true nature of their sustainable offerings by effectively communicating their commitment to sustainable development, which can create stronger trust-based relationships with customers and facilitate shared values.

Finally, the findings of this study emphasize that B2B companies operating in ports, through sustainable branding based on strategic sustainability, can differentiate themselves competitively, obtain social licenses to operate from local communities, investors, and partners, attract investors and business partners interested in sustainable practices and strengthen the internal culture of sustainability. This brand affects how ports are perceived by marine and port service companies, the shipping industry, policymakers, and the general public and can create more conscious

behaviors towards the environment and social responsibility.

Although the current focus on Iranian ports may appear limited, its findings have the potential to have substantial impacts beyond that specific region, particularly in developing nations and the Middle East. Future research could encompass a more comprehensive array of stakeholders, such as suppliers, manufacturers, and buyers, to enhance the current knowledge base. This would enable a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of sustainable branding in the port ecosystem. The study's dependence on a particular cohort of managers and experts is advantageous and disadvantageous, as it provides a potential avenue for future investigation. Future research could utilize longitudinal methods or implement more comprehensive participant sampling to validate and improve the proposed model. This information can provide a better understanding of how sustainable branding contributes to improving port sustainability and competitive positioning. This research fills the theoretical and empirical knowledge gaps, improving our comprehension of sustainable branding in the port sector. Sustainable branding can serve as a potent instrument for safeguarding the environment, enhancing operational efficiency, and differentiating oneself in the market. Studying sustainable branding, rooted in strategic sustainability, opens new opportunities for B2B marketing research and practice. This conclusion is particularly relevant when applied to the vital yet often neglected context of ports in developing countries.

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