



Commentary

Sustainability Communications and Corporate Brand Associations

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ABSTRACT

Executives are increasingly opting to undertake initiatives intended to benefit the natural environment (E), society (S), and/or corporate governance (G); however, the implications of the various messaging vehicles used to convey such corporate sustainability activities on the buying public's perceptions about the company are not fully understood. This article addresses this knowledge gap by explicating how select paid, owned, and earned ESG communications can impact brand perceptions about the selling firm. Specifically, we advance research propositions grounded in the marketing communications literature regarding the impact of firm- and stakeholder-generated ESG communications on a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes that can augment collective corporate brand associations. Furthermore, we describe interesting research opportunities regarding the synergy between firm-generated communications (FGC) and stakeholder-generated communications (SGC) in shaping buyers' perceptions about the selling firm.

KEYWORDS

Brand equity, corporate associations, corporate sustainability reporting, synergy

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I. Introduction

Sustainability is an inescapable corporate priority (Ji et al., 2022; Porter & Kramer, 2006; Sheth, 2020). In contrast to Milton Friedman's assertion that initiatives aiming to benefit society and the environment land outside a firm's purview (i.e., the only business of business is to make a profit), there are growing calls for businesses to address the pressing challenges regarding people and the planet (Elkington, 1999; Savitz & Weber, 2006). The **Business Roundtable (2019)** —a collective of 181 CEOs—for instance, calls on business leaders to broaden the scope of value creation beyond shareholders to also satisfy other stakeholders.

Although of growing interest to executives, sustain-

ability has yet to be woven successfully into brand communications. According to one study, only 30 percent of corporate executives indicated that they would leverage sustainability in their upcoming brand communications (EY, 2015). This comes as little surprise because executives often view branding as "tactical" (Aaker, 2008, p.53) and have yet to consider "brand equity as a strategic asset" (Aaker , 2008, p. 44). Relatively, the distribution of sustainability reports that document a firm's environmental (E), social (S), and/or governance (G) activities has gone mainstream (Fombrun, 2012) as 92 percent of S&P 500 companies and 70 percent of the Russell 1000 Companies measured and reported their sustainability activities in 2020 (Gov-

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ernance & Accountability Institute, 2020). However, those ESG vehicles are maligned in the press as ineffective. They are cast as slick reports containing too much information intended to satisfy too many stakeholders, with some messaging appearing to lack credibility (Pucker, 2021).

We believe that the lack of integration of sustainability into brand communications is a missed opportunity. The reason is that sustainability communications can contribute to building corporate brand associations, which are customer mindset variables about the selling company that get linked to the brand node in collective memory (Berens et al., 2005; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Researchers deem brands a firm wide strategic asset that is central to corporate strategy (Bharadwaj et al., 2020; Edeling et al., 2021; Keller & Lehmann, 2006), so the impact of sustainability communications on corporate brand associations warrants greater academic attention.

This research explores how select paid, owned, and earned ESG communications can impact brand perceptions about the selling firm. Specifically, we advance research propositions regarding the direct impact of firm- and stakeholder-generated ESG communications on a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes that can augment collective corporate brand associations. In addition, we describe interesting research opportunities regarding the synergy between firm-generated communications (FGC) and stakeholder-generated communications (SGC) in shaping buyers' perceptions about the selling firm.

This commentary proceeds as follows. We begin by grounding earlier work on corporate brand associations in the customer-based brand equity writings, which have largely focused on nodes connected to the brand at the product-market level. We then draw on brand communications theorizing (Keller, 2016; Stephen & Galak, 2012) to equate corporate brand associations and customers' responses to brand messaging generated by either the firm (e.g., paid corporate advertising, owned sustainability reports, websites, and social media pages) or stakeholders (e.g., earned posts in social media about a firm's ESG activities and earned mass media coverage). We

conclude by detailing interesting research possibilities regarding the optimal integration of firm-generated communications (FGC) and stakeholder-generated communications (SGC).

2. Corporate Brand Associations

Brand associations are a pivotal construct in the cognitive perspective of brand equity. In that literature, the oft-used associative network memory model advances that the brand is a node that gets connected to many other nodes in customers' schemas, and the complete set of associations represent brand knowledge (Keller, 1993, 2001, 2016). Keller (2002) proposed that brand knowledge is a central element of brand equity and is credited with asserting that it can be construed as "the set of associations and behaviors on the part of the brand's customers... that permits the brand to earn greater volume or greater margins than it could without the brand name" (as quoted in Oh et al., 2020, p. 154).

A subset of associations that get linked to the brand node pertain to a seller's offerings. That brand knowledge encapsulates the level of awareness that customers have of the product or service, the category in which it competes, and the positioning that make its functional, emotional, and/or symbolic benefits distinctive (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020). Another subset of associations pertains to the company, and those associations are common across all the seller's offerings (Dacin & Smith, 1994). These are considered multidimensional as they can encompass a wider range of associations such as the company's: heritage, priorities (e.g., degree of innovativeness, quality, customer centrality, and internationalization), and values reflected in assumed responsibility towards the environment, society, and other stakeholders (Aaker, 2004).

Our interest is in customers' brand knowledge about the company. These corporate brand associations are considered wholly different than associations at the item level (Brown, 1998). In their pioneering study, Brown and Dacin (1997) focused on an element of corporate priorities and values. Regarding corporate priorities, corporate ability associations—which refer to those beliefs and feelings that relate to a

corporation's expertise in developing and producing a product offering—were found to impact product attitudes through their influence on both overall corporate evaluation and evaluation of specific attributes (i.e., "product sophistication"). Regarding corporate values, corporate social responsibility associations, which pertain to the character of the company based on, e.g., the firm's "concern for the environment," "involvement in local communities," and "corporate giving to worthy causes," have a direct, positive effect on overall corporate evaluation (i.e., attitude toward the company) and in turn, influence product attitudes (i.e., consumer opinions of the offerings marketed by the company). Berens et al. (2005) also investigated the impact of the same two dimensions on product attitude and introduced the moderating roles of perceived fit, product involvement, and firm branding strategy. They found that when a firm pursues a mono brand strategy, corporate ability associations are salient cues that affect consumers' product attitudes independent of fit and involvement. In addition, they discovered that corporate social responsibility associations do not influence product attitudes.

It is noteworthy that brand knowledge at the company level encapsulates "beliefs, moods, and emotions, evaluations, etc. about an organization that are held by individuals and that are mentally associated with the organization" (Dacin and Brown , 2002, p. 254). Given the multi-dimensional nature of corporate associations and our interest in sustainability, we focus on a set of potential customers' responses to corporate activities aimed towards the environment, society, and/or its own corporate governance (ESG). In the next section, those customer-mindset variables are cast as outcomes of firm-generated and stakeholder-generated communications.

3. Sustainability Communications and Their Outcomes

Communications regarding a firm's sustainability efforts are vital to organizational reputation and success (Ji et al., 2022). They can shape customers' responses, which are often conceptualized along the lines of cognition, affect, and behavior (Bruce et al., 2012). We build on Batra and Keller's (2016)

interpretation of the think-feel-do sequence to detail possible customer-related outcomes to messaging about a company and follow Dacin and Brown (2002) to construe those outcomes to augment the set of corporate brand associations that the buying public already possesses. Our focus will be on brand communications regarding company sustainability activities and the likely impact of select firm-generated communications (FGC) and stakeholder-generated communications (SGC) on customers' corporate brand associations.

Prior research notes that a range of diverse channels exists through which companies can communicate CSR-related information, such as CSR advertising (Wagner et al., 2009), corporate sustainability reports (Pucker, 2021; Christensen et al., 2021), corporate websites (Du & Vieira, 2012; Maignan & Rasston, 2002), and social media platforms (Dawkins, 2004; Korschun & Du, 2013). In Table I , we denote a sampling of FGC and SGC that can be used to deliver messaging about corporate ESG activities. We follow Stephen and Galak (2012) to classify FGC as either paid or owned and SGC as earned, and draw on Batra and Keller (2016) to list the foundational outcomes that serve as a proxy for brand associations. While Batra and Keller (2016) are ultimately concerned with integrating marketing communications to impact the consumer's path to purchase, a key building block of their framework is the identification of outcomes that can be achieved by various communication options (see their Table I on p.129 and Figure 2 on p.130). We adapt these outcomes to propose that communications about a firm's sustainability initiatives can: 1) create awareness about the seller, 2) convey detailed information about its ESG activities, 3) elicit emotions toward the firm (that can complement informational-based associations), 4) build trust in the firm (based on the perceived authenticity of the message), 5) inspire action tendencies (i.e., drive purchase interest to the firm's goods and services and stimulate word-of-mouth advocacy), and 6) connect people (i.e., have the public serve as a catalysts for brand community). In Table 2 and Table 3 , we provide salient examples of FGC (SGC) to substantiate our

research propositions regarding the effects across FGC and SGC for achieving these outcomes ([Table 1](#)). We follow [Batra and Keller \(2016\)](#) in noting that many of the proposed effects in [Table 1](#) have not been “empirically established by academic research; they should therefore be viewed as research propositions in need of empirical testing” (p.132).

3.1. Paid corporate advertising.

Corporate advertising refers to messaging about the company placed in broadcast, print, and outdoor media that is aimed towards shaping the perceptions of specific audiences ([Ad Age, 2003](#)). In the context of corporate sustainability communications, corporate advertising can showcase a firm’s efforts to benefit the natural environment, society, and/or internal governance policies. It is especially effective in reaching large audiences and engendering an attitudinal attachment. Thus, [Table 1](#) shows that it has the greatest influence on creating awareness and eliciting emotions. It is less effective in conveying detailed information because the messages tend to be short, building trust because the messaging is developed by a self-interested party, and getting people to join a brand community ([Wagner et al., 2009](#)). As shown in [Table 2](#), Hyundai’s “Hope on Wheels” campaign serves as an example of a corporate brand sustainability communication.

3.2. Sustainability reports.

Sustainability reports, which are produced voluntarily to complement required financial reports, document a company’s ESG goals and annual progress toward those goals ([Perego & Kolk, 2012; Pucker, 2021; Christensen et al., 2021](#)). As summarized in [Table 1](#), their main strength is their potential to convey a plethora of information about firm sustainability pursuits to various stakeholders (e.g., consumers, employees, investors, and non-governmental agencies like Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Greenpeace, and Red Cross).

However, in their strength lies their key weakness. They are largely ineffective because they often contain too much information to satisfy the informational needs of too many stakeholders ([Pucker, 2021](#)). Thus, they are deemed moderately effective. On other metrics, they register poorly in their current form. They are not optimal for creating awareness among the

masses because they are not widely read ([Yeomans, 2019](#)). In addition, they are neither well-suited for eliciting emotions nor invoking trust because they predominantly involve rational, infrequent (usually produced once a year), static (i.e., not much chance for interactivity), and self-reported messaging developed by the firm (*ibid*). Finally, they are not effective in stimulating action and building brand community because the informationally-dense messaging is not likely to resonate greatly with customers. A not-so-flattering account of the current state of sustainability reporting appears in [Table 2](#).

3.3. Owned corporate websites.

A firm’s website contains a trove of information about its activities as well as products and services that it wishes to share with customers and other stakeholders ([Dawkins, 2004](#)). It is an effective vehicle for conveying detailed information because it provides the buying public an opportunity to scroll through the menu of information options to identify topics of interest, interact with chat bots and/or live agents to a limited degree, and potentially learn about brand community events ([Du & Vieira, 2012; Hampton-Sosa & Koufaris, 2005](#)). A group of Jeep owners, for instance, banded together to collect more than 2,000 toys for a local “Toys for Tots” campaign during the Christmas holiday and cleaned up trails along a scenic drive for Earth Day ([Ellison, 2018](#)).

As summarized in [Table 1](#), this vehicle can provide in-depth and comprehensive information about a firm’s CSR activities and can connect a variety of stakeholders, including customers ([Du & Vieira, 2012](#)). Websites are likely to be moderately effective in creating awareness because the website can be readily found by those consumers conducting web searches to learn more about a company’s sustainability stance. Furthermore, websites are likely to be moderately effective in eliciting emotions because the content may not be as immersive if viewed on a small screen ([Bharadwaj & Shipley, 2020](#)). They are also likely to be moderately effective in inspiring action ([Harrower, 2019; Maignan & Rasston, 2002](#)). Finally, websites are likely to be less effective in building trust because the messaging is developed by a commercial (rather than a neutral) source and is

Table 1. Propositions for Sustainability Communications Impact on Communication Outcomes

Sustainability Comunica- tion Options	Create Awarness	Convey Detailed Inforation	Elicit Emotions	Build Trust	Inspire Tendencies	Action	Connect People
Firm-Generated Communications							
Corporate Advertising							
Corporate Advertising	+++	+	+++	+	+	+	
Sustainability Reports	+	++	+	+	+	+	
Corporate Website	++	+++	++	+	++	+++	
Corporate Social Media	+++	++	++	++	++	+++	
Stakeholder- Generated Comuni- cations							
Social Media	++	+	+++	++	+++	+++	
Mass Media Coverage	+	+	+++	+++	+	+	

Notes: +++ = greatest influence; ++ = medium influence; + = least influence.

not audited (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). We provide in Table 2 a website that a consultancy developed for a client in the mining industry.

3.4. Owned corporate social media platforms.

Social media sites play a pivotal role in informing today's society. Companies can use their owned web-based social media pages to communicate with various constituencies and facilitate customer-to-customer interactions on those sites (Korschun & Du, 2013). For people aged 18 to 34, it is advanced that "the only way that you can catch their attention is on social media. They will not be visiting your website anytime soon, let alone downloading your perfectly formed sustainability or corporate social responsibility report" (Propper, 2019). It follows that this vehicle rates high in terms of creating awareness and connecting people as that is endemic to social media networks (Miles, 2019).

Social media is likely to be moderately effective in conveying detailed information because social media posts are intended to be short to align with short attention spans and often feature information-rich pictures to complement the text; eliciting emotions because social media posts are intended to be visually engaging, but "sustainability content is often nuanced, and fun images and videos are hard to come by" (Propper, 2019); building trust because the messaging that is

developed by a commercial source is vetted and commented on by people outside the organization (Ho & Wang, 2020); and inspiring action because people are more likely to comment to build on or challenge other opinions (*ibid.*). Microsoft's Instagram Gallery serves as an example in Table 2.

3.5. Earned social media posts.

Earned social media rates high in terms of eliciting emotions because the content generated by those external to the firm is likely to be considered more authentic than firm-generated posts; connecting people as that is endemic to social media networks; and inspiring action tendencies among followers (e.g., resharing, posting their own comment, seeking out more information about the company and its product/service offerings) of non-company contributors (e.g., influencers) because the information received from a non-commercial source is more credible (Korschun & Du, 2013). Social media is moderately effective in creating awareness of the firm because the followers of non-company contributors may not fully align with the firm's target market. In addition, it is moderate in building trust because many consumers are skeptical of the information that they receive in these forums (Moravec et al., 2019). It is less effective in conveying detailed information because non-company contributors may

Table 2. Studied Firm Sustainability Communications and Communication Outcomes

Communication Options	Exemplar(s)	Description	Communication Outcomes	Link
Firm-Generated Corporate Advertising	Hyundai “Hope on Wheels” 2018 Super Bowl Ad.	Emotional ad featuring donation to childhood cancer institutions.	1) Reached large audience (103.4 million TV viewers) 2) Rated in top 10 liked Super Bowl ads on USA Today’s Admeter.	https://www.adage.com/videos/hyundai-hope-detector/ 1433
Sustainability Reports	The majority of Fortune 500 companies voluntarily produce Sustainability Reports.	There is a great deal of confusion as to what companies should report in terms of their ESG activity, which stems in part from seven different reporting standards.	Although these reports can convey a lot of information about a firm's ESG activities they are largely ineffective and described as “written for everybody and nobody at the same time”	https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/jan/06/corporate-sustainability-reporting-waste-time
Corporate Website	A client of a consultancy featured its innovative approach to sustainable mining on its website.	The consultancy created a visually appealing website to help the client effectively convey its story about a more sustainable approach to mining.	The new website resulted in 26% increase in return visitors and an increase in visit duration.	https://www.forbest.com/sites/forbesgenccouncil/2019/12/19/how-to-effectively-tell-your-brands-sustainability-esg-story/?sh=5e68c0b320e0
Corporate Social Media	Microsoft Instagram Gallery that detailed its sustainability efforts.	The gallery features such actions as: the X-box as the world's first carbon-neutral gaming console; there are 50,000 bees in each of the company's AI-enabled Smart Hives in Germany, and the company will be carbon negative by 2030.	Microsoft generated 33,051 responses on its Instagram post, including: 1) chengmester: “Awesome! I hope to apply and join Microsoft's engineering team to help with this endeavor”; 2) shwible.di.bibble: “thank you giant megacorporation!”; and 3) 68th_random_person: “Don't forget privacy negative!”	https://www.instagram.com/p/CE9_C7jIDB/

not have complete information about the ESG initiative and thereby broadcast partial information based on their own knowledge. [Table 3](#) gives an example of Tik-Tok posts made by people with supposed insights into the stock market (“stockfluencers”) and the impact that the content shared can have on the next generation of young investors.

3.6. Earned news stories.

Mass media coverage of a firm’s ESG reports can also shape customers’ responses ([Fombrun, 2012](#)). These earned news reports rate high in terms of building trust because they are covered by an ‘objective’ source and eliciting emotions because the content generated by those external to the firm is likely to be considered more authentic than firm-generated posts ([Chen et al., 2019](#)). However, these news stories tend to create limited awareness because they appear one time (as opposed to corporate advertising to which customers can be exposed many times); convey a minimal amount of information because they tend to be short stories in broadcast, print, or digital media; be limited in stimulating behavior as they do not feature a direct call to action; and not get the public to coalesce around the brand ([Nickerson et al., 2022](#)). The news story about Starbucks’ reusable cup initiative serves as an example in [Table 3](#).

4. Hierarchical Synergy Model

The preceding section provides an understanding of the impact that sustainability messaging in various types of FGC and SGC can have in isolation on desired communication outcomes. However, there also exists a potential for synergistic effects, wherein the impacts on communication outcomes (presented in [Table 1](#)) are strengthened because of the complementary or integrative effects of two or more communication initiatives. [Naik and Raman \(2003, p.385\)](#), who define synergy as “the added value of one medium as a result of the presence of another medium, causing the combined effect of media to exceed the sum of their individual effects,” found that as synergy increases between television and print ads, companies need a larger media budget. This means that not taking synergy into consideration can underestimate the optimal amount that should be allocated for the

media budget. Additionally, they found that a larger (smaller) proportion of the media budget should be allocated to the less (more) effective vehicle. [Naik and Peters \(2009\)](#) extended the notion of synergy to demonstrate within- and cross-media synergy in the context of offline (television, print, and radio) and online ads (banners and search), which together generate higher-order media interactions.

We build on this literature to demonstrate how such synergy would work in the context of FGC and SGC shown in [Figure 1](#) (since the figure is for the purpose of illustration, we only list one type for each). As illustrated, synergy is essentially the interactive effect that occurs between the types of FGC and SGC, either within each source, or across initiatives at the firm and stakeholder level, i.e., between sources. Since these synergistic effects can be simple two-way interactions, or higher-order, three-way or four-way interactions between multiple initiatives, we preclude offering specific research propositions, and instead refer to [Figure 1](#)’s conceptualization as a hierarchical model of sustainability communications.

The synergistic effects shown in [Figure 1](#) can be construed at the strategic level, i.e., one where the key decision is that of resource allocation across these communication initiatives (empirically, the resource could be measured using money or time allocated). In addition to the strategic level, research in the related field of integrated marketing communications (IMC) suggests that firms need to additionally consider integration at the structural and tactical level in their sustainability communications ([Kliatchko, 2005; Schultz & Schultz, 1998](#)). At the structural level, for instance, it has been shown that integrating marketing and public relations can be beneficial for firm reputation ([Nath & Bell, 2016](#)). These authors find that there are synergistic benefits to housing both these functions under a single executive in the top management team, which they argue stems from improved coordination and consistency across marketing and PR communication efforts.

Yet, research has also shown value in the dyadic interface of C-level executives, suggesting that there are benefits to the separate but simultaneous presence

Table 3. Studied Stakeholder Sustainability Communications and Communication Outcomes

Communication Options	Exemplar(s)	Description	Communication Outcomes	Link
Social Media	"StockTok" videos posted on TikTok by "Stockfluencers" who aggregate company information (which can include ESG) and communicate their own investment tips.	Stockfluencers' TikTok posts are received by "millions of young people turning to social media platforms like TikTok for investment advice."	Increased viral content on TikTok regarding the financial outlook of specific companies is shaping investments decisions of the next generation of investors, though flowers are advised to do thorough research before investing (i.e., get more complete information from other sources). Furthermore, the stockfluencers' posts that tag specific companies (e.g., #teslastock) are predicted to experience share price increases.	https://www.irmagazine.com/technology-social-media/stockfluencers-imacting-popularity-compaany-shares-tiktok
Mass Media Coverage	Starbucks' testing out Borrow-A-Cup Programs to get rid of disposable paper and plastic cups by 2025.	A news story describing an analyst call by the company's CFO in which she explained that off-premise sales account for about 70% of U.S. sales, and that those cups end up in streets, rivers, and landfills. They are test marketing out various environmentally-friendly initiatives.	"We know that even the most ardent of sustainability champion customers, they really don't change their behavior all that easily," Amelia Landers, Vice President of Product Experience, said. "Even though they really really want."	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/15/business/food-starbucks-cup-sustainability/index.html

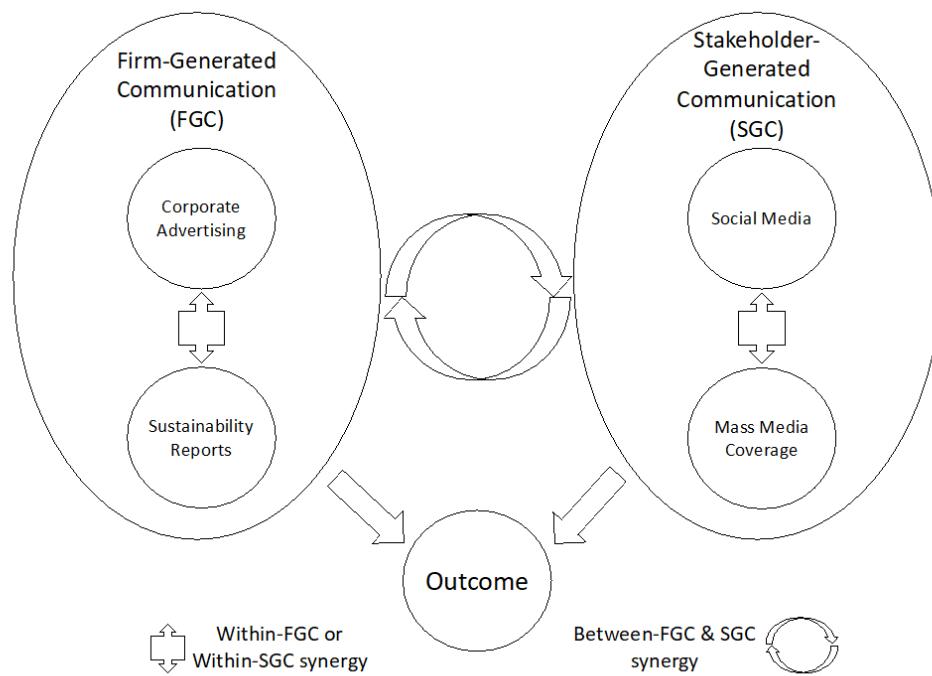


Figure 1. Illustration of Within- and Cross-media Synergies Among Studied Stakeholder Sustainability Communications

of heads of functions in the senior leadership of firms (Nath & Bharadwaj, 2020). Thus, while extant research has studied the Chief Marketing and Chief Sustainability Officers individually (Nath & Mahajan, 2008; Peters et al., 2019), this stream of research suggests the need to understand how firms should structurally organize these upper echelon roles in the context of sustainability communications.

Finally, research at the tactical level of IMC points to the need for consistency across all sustainability communication initiatives so as to better achieve the various intended communication outcomes as the desired messaging gets reinforced across various touchpoints with the targeted audience (Kliatchko, 2005; Naik & Peters, 2009; Schultz & Schultz, 1998).

5. Conclusion

A plurality of voices can shape customers' perceptions of a firm's sustainability efforts. Given the limited attention that executives devote to integrating sus-

tainability into their brand communication messaging, this article advances research propositions regarding the impact of firm-generated ESG communications and stakeholder-generated ESG communications on a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes that can augment collective corporate brand associations. Furthermore, it suggests interesting research opportunities regarding within-FGC synergy, within-SGC synergy, and between-FGC & SGC synergy. We hope that this research provides marketing scientists inspiration to undertake empirical research on the research propositions listed in Table I and the possible within- and cross-media synergies arising from Figure 1. There is certainly a wealth of available theoretical lenses, for example, institutional theory (Perego & Kolk, 2012), legitimacy theory (Du & Vieira, 2012), signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011), and social identity theory (Korschun & Du, 2013), to investigate these open questions in interesting consumption contexts, for example, cross-media consumption (Naik &

(Peters, 2009), livestream broadcasts (Bharadwaj et al., 2022), and the metaverse (Kim, 2021). We are also hopeful that this article assists executives to better understand the impact of their corporate sustainability communications options on customers' responses.

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