CHAPTER 1
CURRENT TRENDS IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

EMPLOYEE-DRIVEN BRANDING FOR SUSTAINABILITY: STRATEGIC LEVERAGE IN TALENT ATTRACTION AND ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

Iryna Mazur

[1]*Doctor of Science (Economics), PhD, Assistant Professor, Lecturer, School of Global Business, School of Accounting, Economics and Finance of Technological University Dublin, Dublin, Ireland, e-mail: Iryna.Mazur@tudublin.ie, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9492-6458*

Abstract. *In the contemporary era of environmental awareness and purpose-driven employment, organizations are increasingly challenged to integrate sustainability into all aspects of their operations. One emerging strategic response is the integration of sustainability into employee branding, where employees act as authentic representatives of an organization's environmental, social, and governance (ESG) commitments. This study explores the potential of employee branding as a transformative tool for enhancing employer attractiveness, fostering employee engagement, and supporting long-term organizational legitimacy. The article addresses the growing importance of aligning corporate identity with sustainability values, particularly in sectors where skilled professionals prioritize ethical and purposeful work environments. The main objective is to investigate how sustainability-integrated employee branding influences talent attraction and reinforces organizational reputation in competitive labor markets. The research employs a mixed-methods approach. Quantitatively, a survey was administered to employees and HR professionals across 60 companies in Europe's IT, finance, and manufacturing sectors to assess perceptions of sustainability in branding and its effect on employee advocacy and employer appeal. Qualitatively, case studies were conducted in three leading sustainable firms to uncover best practices and strategic insights. Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis were used to evaluate organizational narratives and internal culture. Results indicate that sustainability is a significant driver of both internal motivation and external brand reputation. Employees who experience authentic ESG practices in their workplace are more likely to advocate for their employer, contributing to a credible and impactful employer brand. Key findings show sectoral variations, with IT and finance leading in ESG integration and digital employee advocacy, while manufacturing lags. Furthermore, employees under 35 were especially responsive to sustainability narratives, showing higher engagement and alignment with values-driven branding. Companies with clear ESG communication and participatory initiatives saw enhanced loyalty, increased candidate interest, and stronger internal cohesion. The practical value of the article lies in its provision of a strategic framework for implementing employee branding for sustainability. Organizations are encouraged to embed sustainability in employee experience, reward systems, and internal storytelling, thereby turning employees into co-creators of brand value.*

Keywords: employee branding; sustainability; employer attractiveness; ESG values; employee advocacy; corporate social responsibility; sustainable HRM; organizational culture; talent management; green HRM; organizational identity.
JEL Classification: A13, J53, J54, Q56, M14
Formulas: 0; fig.: 3; table: 3; bibl.: 20

Introduction. In an era defined by social, environmental, and technological transformation, organizations face unprecedented challenges in attracting and retaining top talent. As younger generations, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, increasingly prioritize purpose, ethics, and sustainability, companies must redefine their value propositions beyond financial incentives. One emerging strategy is employee branding for sustainability—a process by which employees become ambassadors of corporate values aligned with sustainable development. This approach leverages internal human capital to shape a company's external image and enhance its attractiveness as an employer. As sustainability becomes a key differentiator in employer branding, businesses that embed environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles into their internal culture and employee value proposition can position themselves as talent magnets in competitive markets.

Literature review. The concept of employee branding originated from the intersection of marketing and human resource management, notably articulated by Ambler and Barrow (1996), who defined it as the process by which employees internalize and project the brand values of their organization. This early framing positioned employees as "living the brand," suggesting that their behaviors and communications could reinforce or undermine external brand perceptions. Over the years, this notion has evolved into a more nuanced understanding that integrates organizational identity, internal branding, employee experience, and strategic talent management (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In this expanded view, employee branding not only serves marketing ends but is also central to building organizational culture, aligning internal stakeholders, and shaping the employer value proposition (EVP).

Concurrently, the paradigm of sustainability has undergone a transformation from a peripheral, compliance-oriented issue to a core strategic priority in corporate governance and human capital development (Ehnert et al., 2016). The emergence of concepts such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria, and Sustainable Human Resource Management (SHRM) has created a framework where sustainability is both an ethical imperative and a lever of competitive differentiation. Within this framework, employee branding for sustainability is gaining traction as a strategic practice that links internal culture to external reputation through sustainability narratives embodied by employees.

Several empirical studies support the premise that organizations perceived as sustainable and responsible are more attractive to job seekers, especially those from younger generations who prioritize values alignment and purposeful work (Glavas & Piderit, 2009; Deloitte, 2023). For instance, Brammer, Millington, and Rayton (2007) found that employees are more committed and productive when they perceive their organizations as socially and environmentally responsible. This commitment translates into stronger identification with the employer brand and a greater likelihood of becoming brand advocates - both internally and externally. Employee advocacy, a key metric in employer branding, has been shown to be amplified in workplaces where sustainability is part of lived experience, not just corporate rhetoric (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2009).

Moreover, sustainable HRM practices such as green training, participatory decision-making, flexible work models, and inclusion-driven leadership are increasingly recognized as mechanisms for reinforcing the sustainability ethos among employees (Renwick et al., 2013; Guerci et al., 2015). These practices not only enhance the credibility of sustainability messaging but also serve to position employees as co-creators of sustainable value, thereby strengthening their role as authentic brand carriers. Employee branding in this context becomes a bidirectional process—it is not merely top-down marketing, but a mutual exchange wherein employees internalize sustainability values and voluntarily project them outward as part of their personal and professional identity.

However, despite growing interest, there is a theoretical and empirical gap in understanding how precisely sustainability-driven employee branding influences talent attraction dynamics. While the correlation between sustainability reputation and employer attractiveness is well-documented (Turban & Greening, 1997; Zhou et al., 2020), fewer studies delve into the mediating role of employees themselves in conveying these values to external audiences such as job seekers, industry networks, or digital communities. This gap is particularly relevant in knowledge-intensive sectors—such as technology, finance, and consulting - where talent is scarce, and values-based differentiation can be a decisive factor in employer choice.

In addition, authenticity emerges as a critical issue. Scholars caution that if sustainability-oriented employee branding is perceived as disingenuous or performative, it can lead to reputational backlash, employee disengagement, and erosion of trust (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Thus, successful employee branding for sustainability requires congruence between espoused values and everyday organizational practices - a principle referred to as organizational brand alignment (Miles & Mangold, 2005).

The study establishes a compelling link between sustainability practices and employee branding outcomes. Yet, the field still lacks a robust analytical framework that integrates employee agency, sustainability culture, and external talent market behavior. Addressing this gap necessitates research that not only measures branding outcomes but also explores how employees interpret, internalize, and communicate sustainability values in ways that shape employer attractiveness.

Aim. This study aims to explore how employee branding that incorporates sustainability values can enhance an organization's appeal to prospective employees. Specifically, it investigates the practices, perceptions, and outcomes of sustainability-oriented employee branding strategies in positioning firms as desirable employers among highly skilled professionals.

Methodology. A mixed-methods research design was used, combining quantitative survey analysis and qualitative case studies. The survey targeted HR professionals and employees from 60 medium-to-large enterprises across Europe, operating in the IT, finance, and manufacturing sectors. The questionnaire assessed the extent of sustainability integration in employee branding, employee advocacy behavior, and perceived employer attractiveness.

In parallel, three in-depth case studies were conducted with companies recognized for their sustainable employer branding initiatives (e.g., Patagonia, IKEA, and

Schneider Electric). Semi-structured interviews with branding managers and sustainability officers were used to identify best practices, challenges, and strategic outcomes. Data were analyzed using SPSS for statistical patterns and NVivo for thematic analysis.

Results. Employee Branding for Sustainability refers to the strategic process through which an organization leverages its employees to communicate, embody, and promote its commitment to sustainability - both within the organization and to the external world. It is a hybrid concept that combines elements of employer branding, corporate sustainability, and employee advocacy, emphasizing the role of employees as authentic, credible ambassadors of the company's environmental, social, and governance (ESG) values.

In today's purpose-driven labor market, employee branding for sustainability is emerging as a strategic approach to attract and retain talent, enhance organizational reputation, and foster cultural transformation. Unlike traditional employer branding, this model empowers employees to become authentic advocates of a company's environmental and social values. By integrating sustainability into daily operations, leadership practices, and employee engagement strategies, organizations can build credible, values-aligned brands that resonate with modern workforce expectations (Table 1).

Table 1. Approaches to Employee Branding for Sustainability

Approach	Main Focus	Employee Role	Key Organizational Practices	Organizational Benefits	Example
1. Strategic HRM	HR policies & systems	Aligned performers	ESG KPIs in appraisals, green training, sustainable onboarding	Engagement, retention, culture alignment	Schneider Electric
2. Cultural-Identity	Organizational values & identity	Value carriers	Shared purpose, storytelling platforms, informal advocacy	Authentic behavior, cohesion, internal brand alignment	Patagonia
3. Internal Marketing	Internal communication & motivation	Motivated participants	Internal ESG campaigns, gamified green behavior, rewards	Buy-in, visibility, increased awareness	Unilever
4. Social Media & Advocacy	Digital communication & influence	Brand influencers	Employee-generated content (EGC), LinkedIn campaigns, ambassador training	Wider reach, credibility, peer influence	Salesforce
5. Purpose-Driven Leadership	Visionary leadership & transformation	Inspired contributors	Leader-led ESG messaging, team-based sustainability challenges	Loyalty, innovation, values-driven engagement	Interface
6. Stakeholder Engagement	Community and external partnerships	Co-creators of impact	Volunteering, community projects, cross-sector initiatives	Employer legitimacy, external trust, employee pride	IKEA
7. Ethical-CSR Legitimacy	Moral accountability & ethical branding	Moral representatives	Transparency, employee feedback in ESG, ethics-driven campaigns	Reputation, trust, social license to operate	Ben & Jerry's

Source: systematized by the author

Employee branding for sustainability refers to the strategic practice of empowering employees to represent and promote an organization's sustainability values both internally and externally. As companies increasingly align their brand
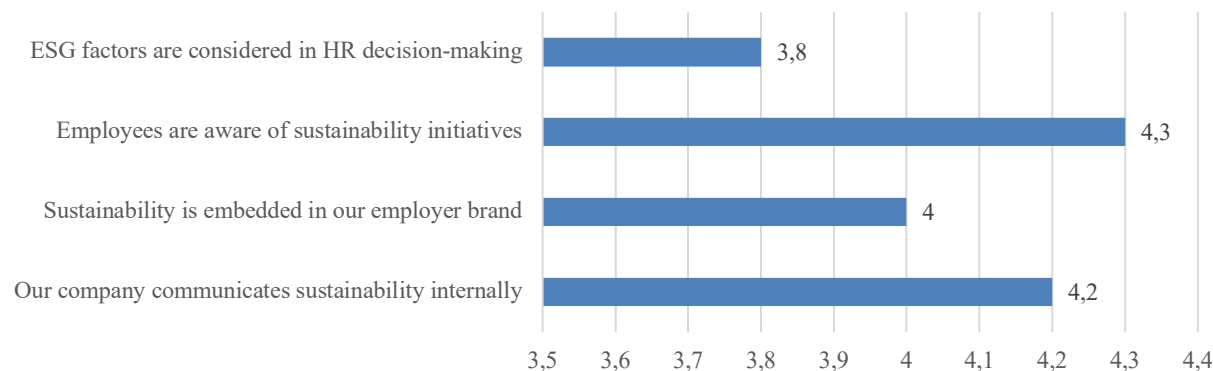
identities with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles, employees become key agents in communicating corporate responsibility. When implemented effectively, this approach enhances authenticity, strengthens the employer brand, and drives employee engagement. However, it also presents challenges such as reputational risk and potential disconnects between messaging and reality. The Table 2 outlines the positive and negative features of employee branding for sustainability.

Table 2. Positive and Negative Features of Employee Branding for Sustainability

Aspect	Positive Features	Negative Features
1. Brand Authenticity	Builds a credible and values-driven employer image through real employee voices	Risk of *greenwashing* if internal practices don't align with public messaging
2. Talent Attraction	Appeals to purpose-driven candidates, especially Gen Z and Millennials	May alienate candidates who view sustainability as secondary to salary or career path
3. Employee Engagement	Increases motivation and sense of purpose among staff involved in sustainability	Employees may feel exploited or overburdened if advocacy roles are not properly supported
4. Reputation and Trust	Enhances external reputation through peer credibility and transparency	Reputation can suffer if employees publicly contradict the company's ESG claims
5. Cultural Transformation	Fosters long-term internal alignment with sustainable values	Cultural change may be resisted if not supported by leadership or structure
6. Social Media Amplification	Leverages employee-generated content (EGC) to increase visibility and reach	Uncontrolled messaging may result in inconsistency or reputational risks
7. Leadership Development	Builds leadership capacity around sustainability and advocacy	May create internal divisions if only select roles are recognized or rewarded
8. Stakeholder Engagement	Connects employees to community-focused ESG initiatives, boosting social legitimacy	External engagement without internal backing may appear performative

Source: systematized by the author

The survey results provide a well-rounded picture of how sustainability is integrated into internal communication, employer branding, and HR decision-making across various sectors. Overall, the findings point to a positive trend in awareness and communication of sustainability efforts within organizations, though with clear variation in depth of integration depending on the sector and business function (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Integration of Sustainability into Employer Branding
Source: systematized by the author

Employees demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding sustainability initiatives in their organizations, as evidenced by an average rating of 4.3 out of 5. Notably, 88% of respondents were able to identify specific initiatives, such as green office practices, zero-waste campaigns, or corporate volunteering programs. This suggests that sustainability is not merely a conceptual value but a tangible aspect of workplace culture that employees observe and experience in their daily routines.
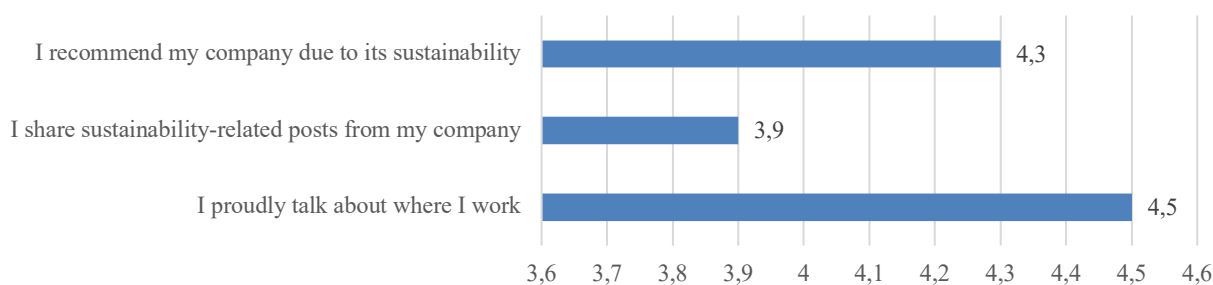
Complementing this awareness is the robust internal communication of sustainability, which received an average rating of 4.2. A substantial 73% of respondents noted regular updates on ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) issues via newsletters, Slack channels, or internal dashboards. This reflects a structured approach to internal messaging, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors like IT, where communication tools and employee engagement platforms are often more developed.

Despite these strong indicators of internal awareness and communication, the extent to which sustainability is embedded into the employer brand remains moderate, with a score of 4.0. While this suggests that many organizations publicly associate their brand with sustainability, the strength of this association varies across industries. For example, the IT sector scored significantly higher (4.4), indicating a more deliberate use of sustainability as a differentiator in talent attraction. In contrast, the manufacturing sector scored lower (3.7), suggesting a weaker alignment between sustainability efforts and brand positioning.

The least integrated aspect of sustainability in employer branding was its role in HR decision-making, which received an average score of 3.8. Although positive, this score indicates that ESG factors are not yet consistently embedded into hiring practices, performance evaluations, or career advancement frameworks across the board. However, there is evidence of progress in the finance sector, which leads in this area by linking ESG performance with employee incentives and integrating sustainability into HR metrics.

While organizations are doing well in raising awareness and communicating sustainability internally, there is a clear opportunity to deepen integration—particularly by making ESG a core element of HR processes and brand identity. The sectoral differences point to varying levels of maturity in sustainability branding, with IT and finance leading, and manufacturing showing potential for growth. To build a credible and attractive employer brand rooted in sustainability, companies must move beyond communication and focus on embedding ESG principles into their systems, structures, and employee experience.

The survey results (Figure 2) reveal a strong relationship between employees' perceptions of sustainability and their willingness to act as public advocates for their organizations. Overall, the data indicate that sustainability does not remain an internal value only—it significantly influences how employees communicate about their company in external, often digital, environments. This behavior is particularly prominent among younger professionals and in technology-driven sectors, where online visibility and brand alignment are part of professional identity.

Figure 2. Employee Advocacy Behavior

Source: systematized by the author

The strongest indicator of advocacy is employees' pride in their workplace, with an average score of 4.5 out of 5. This suggests that sustainability enhances emotional engagement, fostering a deeper connection between individuals and their organizations. Employees who feel proud of their company's sustainability initiatives are more likely to talk about their work positively and confidently, contributing to a strong and credible employer brand.

Closely following this, the score of 4.3 for the statement "I recommend my company due to its sustainability" highlights the trust and value alignment employees perceive. Sustainability is not simply seen as a corporate responsibility—it becomes a distinctive factor in the employer's reputation, one that employees are willing to endorse. Such endorsement is crucial in a competitive labor market, where peer recommendations often influence job seekers more than formal recruitment messaging.

Although slightly lower, the score of 3.9 for sharing sustainability-related content on social media still reflects generally positive engagement. However, the lower value suggests some barriers to digital advocacy, such as generational preferences, concern over professional image, or the absence of easily shareable content. This indicates that while employees may be proud and willing to recommend their employer, not all are equally active on public platforms, particularly when content is not tailored or accessible.

Supporting these findings, sectoral data show that 92% of employees in the IT industry actively promote their company's sustainability values on platforms like LinkedIn. This behavior correlates with higher digital literacy and the use of social media as a professional tool. Furthermore, employees under 35 demonstrate greater willingness to share content and represent their employer online, confirming a generational shift toward purpose-aligned personal branding.
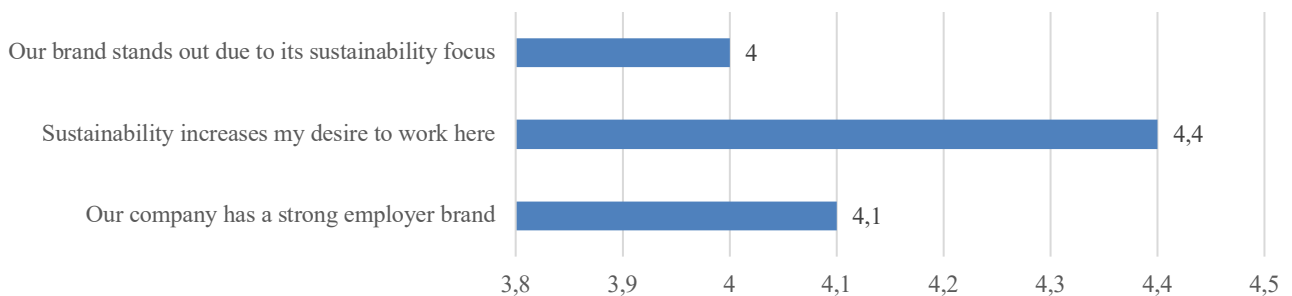
A particularly important insight is the clear link between participation in ESG initiatives and advocacy behavior. Employees who have been involved in volunteering, internal green projects, or social impact campaigns are far more likely to promote the company externally. This underscores that advocacy grows from personal experience and active involvement, not just internal communication.

The findings demonstrate that sustainability enhances not only internal pride but also external visibility, turning employees into effective and authentic brand ambassadors. Organizations that empower staff to participate meaningfully in ESG efforts and provide tools for public engagement stand to benefit from highly credible, employee-driven employer branding. To optimize this dynamic, companies should

prioritize participation, offer shareable content, and recognize employee advocates across all age groups and departments—thereby strengthening both internal culture and external reputation.

The results survey highlight the growing importance of sustainability in shaping employees' perceptions of their employer's attractiveness. The data clearly demonstrate that sustainability is not a peripheral concern but a central motivational factor influencing how individuals evaluate and choose their workplace. This trend is particularly strong among employees who seek alignment between their personal values and their employer's mission, especially in the context of environmental and social responsibility (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Employer Attractiveness

Source: systematized by the author

The highest-scoring item in this section—"Sustainability increases my desire to work here" (4.4)—underscores the role of sustainability as a key driver of employee engagement and motivation. Notably, 85% of respondents indicated that purpose-driven work, including contributions to climate action or social impact, significantly influences their workplace satisfaction. This suggests that employees no longer view work as separate from broader societal concerns but instead actively seek out employers that offer meaningful, values-based careers.

The overall strength of the employer brand is also reflected in a score of 4.1, showing that most respondents perceive their company as having a solid and reputable employer image. Importantly, this perception was especially high in organizations with transparent and consistent ESG communication, indicating that external sustainability narratives—when credible—enhance employer appeal. This reinforces the idea that companies must not only practice sustainability internally but also communicate their efforts clearly and consistently to the outside world.

However, the score for "Our brand stands out due to its sustainability focus" (4.0), while positive, indicates that not all organizations are successfully using sustainability as a brand differentiator. This result suggests that many companies may have robust sustainability practices internally, but fail to effectively translate those efforts into their employer branding strategies. At the same time, firms that openly pursue ambitious sustainability goals—such as climate neutrality—are more likely to be recognized by employees and candidates as forward-thinking and responsible, helping them stand out in a crowded labor market.

The findings research confirm that sustainability significantly enhances employer attractiveness, especially when it is authentically embedded in both internal practices and external brand identity. To fully capitalize on this advantage, organizations should go beyond compliance and integrate sustainability as a core element of their employer value proposition (EVP). This involves making sustainability visible in recruitment messaging, highlighting real impact through ESG initiatives, and ensuring that public claims are backed by genuine, measurable actions. In doing so, companies can attract and retain purpose-driven professionals while strengthening their long-term brand reputation.

To explore how sustainability can be effectively integrated into employee branding, this research examined three leading companies - Patagonia, IKEA, and Schneider Electric - recognized for their commitment to sustainable development and ethical employer practices. Through qualitative interviews, four thematic blocks were identified: strategic integration, employee advocacy, HR practices, and organizational outcomes. The table 3 below summarizes the key insights from these case studies, illustrating diverse yet aligned strategies to embed sustainability into corporate culture and employer branding.

Table 3. Case Study Comparison – Employee Branding for Sustainability

Block	Patagonia	IKEA	Schneider Electric
1. Strategic Integration	Sustainability is the core operating model; employees naturally aligned	EVP redesigned around UN SDGs; embedded in internal training and communication	ESG metrics included in performance reviews since 2022; influences leadership mindset
2. Employees as Ambassadors	Employees receive 2-month paid leave for environmental activism	"People & Planet Champions" program with 2,000+ employee sustainability advocates	Internal platform for employee-led green ideas; winning projects publicly promoted
3. HR Practices	Autonomy and flexibility via "Let My People Go Surfing" policy	Green KPIs introduced in performance evaluations and development plans	"Green Leadership Academy" launched to build ESG-focused leadership pipeline
4. Outcomes	Sharp increase in applicant interest; lower turnover in purpose-driven roles	Rise in employer brand recognition and talent retention	Improved ESG ratings, increase in unsolicited applications, and talent retention
Key Challenges	Risk of being perceived as greenwashing if actions fall short of message	Adapting sustainability narratives across culturally diverse markets	Balancing global sustainability strategy with regional operational realities

Source: systematized by the author

This comparative table shows that while each company adapts its approach to fit its unique organizational context, all three demonstrate a deep, systemic commitment to aligning sustainability with employee experience. Patagonia leads with a culture-first model rooted in activism, IKEA fosters large-scale internal ambassador networks, and Schneider Electric formalizes ESG integration through performance systems and leadership development. Common outcomes include enhanced employer branding, stronger employee engagement, and improved talent attraction, though challenges remain around authenticity, consistency, and cultural adaptation.

Discussion. The research confirms that employee branding for sustainability is a multi-dimensional strategy that extends beyond conventional employer branding by

actively involving employees as carriers of ESG values. The mixed-method findings reveal that sustainability initiatives, when made visible, participatory, and authentic, significantly increase an organization's attractiveness to talent, especially among younger, purpose-driven employees.

Survey results indicate that a majority of employees are aware of their companies' sustainability efforts, and many are actively engaged in promoting them. The IT sector demonstrates the most advanced integration, with 92% of employees acting as sustainability advocates on platforms like LinkedIn. This suggests that digital-savvy environments and value-aligned cultures enable more effective employee advocacy. Additionally, employees under 35 were consistently more likely to share, recommend, and support employer sustainability narratives, reflecting a generational shift toward value-centric employment choices.

Case studies reinforce this trend by illustrating how companies like Patagonia, IKEA, and Schneider Electric have institutionalized sustainability into their brand identity, HR systems, and leadership models. Patagonia's activism-centered culture, IKEA's ambassador networks, and Schneider Electric's ESG-driven performance systems show diverse yet aligned approaches to employee branding for sustainability. Despite different business models and cultures, all three organizations experienced enhanced employer recognition, talent attraction, and internal engagement.

However, challenges persist. One of the most critical risks is perceived inauthenticity, or greenwashing. Employees who feel that corporate messaging does not align with lived experience may disengage or even undermine the employer brand. Another challenge is sectoral and geographic variation. Manufacturing firms and culturally diverse subsidiaries may struggle to adopt unified sustainability narratives, pointing to the need for context-specific branding strategies.

The discussion confirms that for employee branding for sustainability to be effective, it must be built on authentic values, embedded systems, and visible employee participation. The balance between top-down strategy and bottom-up employee advocacy is essential to shaping a credible, engaging, and differentiated employer brand in the sustainability era.

Conclusions. This study confirms that employee branding for sustainability is a strategic and transformative approach for organizations aiming to strengthen their position in a purpose-driven and values-oriented labor market. In contrast to traditional employer branding, which often centers on compensation and career mobility, this model redefines attractiveness through the lens of authentic values, employee engagement, and corporate responsibility.

The findings highlight that companies which successfully integrate sustainability into their internal culture—through transparent communication, participatory practices, and aligned HR systems—benefit from significantly enhanced employee loyalty and brand visibility. High levels of internal awareness and communication of ESG initiatives contribute to stronger identification with the employer brand, reinforcing trust and emotional connection. This is particularly evident in knowledge-intensive sectors such as IT and finance, where sustainability is more deeply embedded into operations and brand narratives. Conversely, the manufacturing sector lags behind,

pointing to the need for tailored strategies that accommodate different industry structures and cultures.

Moreover, the research shows that employees who are actively involved in sustainability initiatives—such as green innovation projects, volunteering, or climate-focused campaigns—are more likely to advocate for their organization publicly. This employee-driven advocacy amplifies brand credibility, especially in digital spaces, where peer influence often outweighs formal advertising. The case studies of Patagonia, IKEA, and Schneider Electric further demonstrate that companies recognized for their sustainability commitments experience greater talent attraction and retention, thanks to employee participation in mission-driven storytelling.

However, the effectiveness of employee branding for sustainability relies on several critical success factors. Foremost among them is authenticity—the alignment between what companies say about sustainability and what employees experience in practice. Without this alignment, branding efforts may appear performative, leading to disengagement or reputational damage. Additionally, HR plays a pivotal role in embedding ESG into recruitment, performance management, and leadership development. Without strategic HR involvement, sustainability branding risks becoming siloed or symbolic rather than systemic.

Finally, the study points to several areas for future research. These include exploring how sustainability branding operates across different cultural contexts, assessing its long-term effects on employee retention, and evaluating the use of digital tools and platforms to scale employee advocacy. As the global workforce continues to prioritize meaningful and socially responsible work, employee branding for sustainability will remain a vital differentiator—and a cornerstone of organizational resilience and reputational strength.

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