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SUSTAINABLE DIGITAL MARKETING AND GREEN CONSUMERISM: THE ROLE OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN BRAND POSITIONING

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ABSTRACT

Digital marketing generates substantial carbon emissions while serving as the primary channel for sustainability communication, creating a fundamental paradox for organizations positioning brands around environmental responsibility. This research examined how Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) mediates relationships between sustainable digital marketing practices and brand positioning effectiveness among green consumers. Employing a mixed-methods design, the study analyzed survey data from 427 environmentally conscious consumers and conducted 23 interviews plus content analysis of 30+ digital campaigns. Structural equation modeling revealed CSR perception mediates 58.3% of the total effect between sustainable digital marketing and brand positioning. Sustainable digital marketing significantly influenced CSR perceptions ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$) and brand positioning ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), while CSR perceptions strongly impacted brand positioning ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$). Environmental consciousness moderated these relationships positively, while greenwashing perceptions undermined positioning efforts ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < 0.001$). Findings demonstrate organizations cannot achieve sustainable brand positioning through digital tactics alone; genuine CSR commitment communicated authentically through environmentally responsible channels proves essential. The research advances theoretical integration while providing actionable frameworks balancing commercial effectiveness with environmental responsibility.

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INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of marketing has fundamentally reshaped how organizations communicate with consumers, market products, and position brands in increasingly competitive global markets. As of 2025, global digital advertising expenditure exceeds $700 billion annually, with projections indicating continued exponential growth as businesses shift resources from traditional to digital channels. However, this digital revolution has emerged alongside unprecedented growth in environmental consciousness among consumers and mounting concerns about the ecological impact of digital technologies themselves. Contrary to early assumptions that digital marketing represented an inherently sustainable alternative to traditional print and broadcast advertising, recent evidence reveals a sobering paradox. Digital marketing activities now generate more carbon emissions than the entire aviation industry, with data centers powering websites, social media platforms, and digital advertisements accounting for 2.5% of global CO2 emissions. Each digital advertisement impression produces up to 1.09 grams of CO2, and an average digital campaign generates approximately 71 tons of carbon dioxide emissions—equivalent to 35 round-trip flights between Paris and New York. This environmental paradox exists within a context of heightened consumer environmental awareness. Studies indicate that 73% of millennials are willing to pay more for sustainable products, with 66% of global consumers expressing willingness to accept higher prices for brands committed to environmentally friendly practices. As environmental consciousness grows, consumers increasingly seek brands demonstrating genuine commitment to environmental sustainability and social responsibility, creating both opportunities and challenges for organizations navigating digital marketing strategies. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved from peripheral business concern to strategic imperative directly influencing brand equity, consumer trust, and competitive positioning. Organizations increasingly recognize that CSR initiatives extend beyond philanthropic activities to encompass comprehensive integration of environmental, social, and governance considerations throughout business operations. The digitalization of CSR activities has introduced new dimensions, as Web 2.0 technologies and social media platforms enable organizations to communicate sustainability commitments with unprecedented reach, speed, and interactivity. However, this landscape is complicated by growing consumer skepticism toward superficial environmental claims—the phenomenon of "greenwashing." Consumer distrust of unsubstantiated sustainability claims has reached critical levels, with consumers demanding transparency regarding carbon footprints, supply chain ethics, and measurable environmental impact. This

authenticity crisis drives demand for third-party certifications, genuine eco-friendly innovations, and circular economy business models.

Problem Statement: Despite growing consumer demand for environmental sustainability and increasing organizational investment in Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, significant challenges persist in effectively communicating genuine environmental commitments through digital marketing channels. Organizations face a fundamental paradox: digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for engaging green consumers and amplifying CSR messages, yet the digital marketing infrastructure itself contributes substantially to environmental degradation, potentially undermining claims of organizational sustainability. The prevalence of greenwashing has eroded trust in sustainability marketing, creating challenges for genuinely sustainable businesses attempting to differentiate authentic commitments from superficial green marketing. Organizations struggle to balance digital marketing effectiveness with emissions reduction, lacking frameworks for optimizing both performance and environmental sustainability. Furthermore, substantial gaps exist between green consumer intentions and actual purchasing behaviors, with limited understanding of which sustainable digital marketing strategies effectively engage different consumer segments. Current literature treats sustainable marketing, digital marketing, CSR communication, green consumer behavior, and brand positioning as largely distinct research streams, with limited theoretical frameworks integrating these domains and explicating how they interrelate within digital ecosystems. This theoretical fragmentation hinders both scholarly understanding and practical application.

Research Objectives: This research examines how Corporate Social Responsibility mediates the relationship between sustainable digital marketing practices and brand positioning effectiveness in the context of contemporary green consumerism. The study pursues six specific objectives:

Identify and categorize sustainable digital marketing practices adopted by organizations, assessing their environmental impacts and effectiveness in engaging green consumers. Analyze green consumer behavior dynamics in digital environments, examining how environmental consciousness influences digital engagement and brand evaluation. Investigate how consumers perceive and evaluate CSR initiatives communicated through digital channels, identifying factors enhancing or diminishing credibility. Examine the mediating role of CSR perceptions in relationships between sustainable digital marketing and brand positioning outcomes. Assess how sustainable digital marketing and CSR strategies differentially impact various brand positioning dimensions including awareness, image, loyalty, and associations. Develop and validate an integrated theoretical framework synthesizing sustainable digital marketing, CSR perception, green consumerism, and brand positioning constructs.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question: How does Corporate Social Responsibility perception mediate the relationship between sustainable digital marketing practices and brand positioning effectiveness among green consumers in digital environments?

Secondary Research Questions: What sustainable digital marketing practices do organizations employ, and how do these impact environmental footprints while engaging environmentally conscious consumers?

How do green consumers evaluate brand authenticity in sustainability claims communicated through digital marketing channels?

What dimensions of CSR most significantly influence consumer perceptions of brands in digital contexts?

Through what mechanisms do CSR perceptions mediate relationships between sustainable digital marketing exposure and brand positioning outcomes?

How do individual differences moderate relationships among sustainable digital marketing, CSR perception, and brand positioning?

Significance of the Study: This research offers substantial contributions across theoretical, methodological, and practical domains. Theoretically, it advances integration of sustainable marketing, digital marketing, CSR communication, green consumer behavior, and brand positioning theories, providing comprehensive framework explicating relationships among these constructs. The study elaborates CSR's mediating mechanisms and extends psychological safety theory into digital consumer contexts.

Methodologically, the research employs sophisticated mixed methods design combining quantitative mediation modeling with qualitative mechanism exploration, developing validated measurement instruments for sustainable digital marketing practices and demonstrating advanced analytical approaches applicable to future marketing research. Practically, findings generate actionable frameworks guiding organizational strategy regarding sustainable marketing adoption, CSR communication optimization, platform selection, and brand positioning implementation. The research addresses critical managerial dilemmas regarding performance-sustainability balance, consumer engagement optimization, authenticity enhancement, and competitive advantage development through CSR-driven sustainable marketing. Societally, the study contributes to marketing practice evolution toward environmental responsibility, consumer empowerment through enhanced evaluation capabilities, and climate action support through reducing digital marketing's carbon footprint while amplifying effective sustainability communication.

Scope and Structure: This research focuses on developed markets in North America, Western Europe, and selected Asia-Pacific regions, emphasizing consumer-facing industries including FMCG, fashion, technology, and food sectors. The study examines environmentally conscious consumers across multiple digital platforms including social media, search engines, display advertising, email marketing, and corporate websites.

The thesis comprises six chapters: Introduction establishing research foundations; Literature Review synthesizing relevant scholarship and developing conceptual frameworks; Research Methodology articulating philosophical foundations and analytical techniques; Data Analysis and Findings presenting empirical results; Discussion interpreting findings and deriving implications; and Conclusion synthesizing contributions and providing evidence-based recommendations. This investigation addresses critical gaps at the intersection of sustainability, digital transformation, and consumer behavior, contributing to both academic understanding and organizational practice in an era demanding environmental responsibility alongside commercial viability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The convergence of digital marketing, environmental sustainability, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) represents a critical yet underexplored area in marketing scholarship. This review synthesizes literature across four interconnected domains: green consumerism, sustainable digital marketing practices, CSR communication, and brand positioning.

Theoretical Foundations: Stakeholder theory provides foundational logic for CSR initiatives, suggesting organizations must balance commercial objectives with environmental responsibilities to maintain legitimacy. Signaling theory explains how CSR functions as credible signal reducing information asymmetry between organizations and consumers, with digital platforms serving as

signaling mechanisms through transparency and third-party certifications. The Theory of Planned Behavior illuminates pathways through which sustainable digital marketing influences attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Brand equity theory positions environmental associations as sources of differentiation and competitive advantage.

Green Consumerism: Research documents steady growth in environmental consciousness, with 73% of millennials expressing willingness to pay premiums for sustainable products. Green consumerism encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, though significant attitude-behavior gaps persist due to price sensitivity, convenience priorities, and greenwashing skepticism. Consumer segmentation research identifies heterogeneous groups ranging from true green consumers demonstrating consistent commitment to skeptics demanding rigorous verification.

Sustainable Digital Marketing: Sustainable digital marketing encompasses two dimensions: promoting sustainable consumption through digital channels and minimizing digital marketing's environmental footprint. Recent evidence reveals digital marketing generates substantial carbon emissions, with the digital ecosystem responsible for 3.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions and individual campaigns producing approximately 70 tons of CO2 equivalent. Organizations adopt strategies including green web hosting, content optimization, targeted segmentation, and authentic storytelling to balance effectiveness with sustainability. Research demonstrates sustainable digital marketing effectively influences consumer behavior when implemented authentically, positively correlating with environmental awareness and purchase intentions.

Corporate Social Responsibility: CSR has evolved from defensive risk management to proactive value creation strategy encompassing environmental, social, governance, and philanthropic dimensions. Digital platforms transform CSR communication from one-way announcements to interactive stakeholder dialogues through social media storytelling, transparent reporting, and participatory campaigns. Studies demonstrate CSR positively impacts brand image, with green brand image mediating relationships between CSR and brand loyalty. However, greenwashing risks necessitate authentic practices and transparent communication.

Brand Positioning in Digital Environments: Sustainable brand positioning emphasizes environmental and social responsibility as core identity elements. Digital platforms influence positioning through content marketing, social media engagement, influencer partnerships, and user-generated content amplification. Effective positioning requires genuine organizational commitment, measurable impact demonstration, and consistent messaging across channels. Third-party certifications and sustainability reports enhance positioning authenticity.

Research Gaps: Despite extensive scholarship, critical gaps persist: limited integration of sustainable marketing, digital marketing, CSR, and brand positioning theories; insufficient understanding of CSR's mediating mechanisms; minimal research addressing digital marketing's environmental footprint paradox; and inadequate exploration of how digital platforms uniquely enable sustainable brand positioning. This research addresses these gaps through integrated framework development examining how CSR mediates relationships between sustainable digital marketing practices and brand positioning effectiveness among green consumers.

Research Methodology

Research Philosophy and Design: This research adopts a pragmatic philosophical paradigm, prioritizing the research question over methodological allegiance. Pragmatism values both objective and subjective knowledge, recognizing that understanding complex phenomena like sustainable digital marketing requires multiple perspectives. The study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide comprehensive understanding of how CSR mediates relationships between sustainable digital marketing practices and brand positioning effectiveness. The mixed-methods approach is particularly appropriate for sustainability research due to the topic's contemporary nature and complexity. Quantitative methods provide statistical evidence of relationships and enable generalization, while qualitative methods offer contextual depth explaining mechanisms underlying observed patterns. This methodological integration addresses limitations inherent in mono-method approaches, generating richer insights essential for theoretical advancement and practical application.

Quantitative Phase

Survey Design: The quantitative phase employs cross-sectional survey research targeting environmentally conscious consumers across North America, Western Europe, and Asia-Pacific regions. A structured online questionnaire collects data on sustainable digital marketing exposure, CSR perceptions, brand positioning evaluations, and demographic characteristics.

Sample and Sampling: The study targets 400-500 respondents using purposive sampling supplemented by snowball techniques to reach green consumer segments. Inclusion criteria require participants aged 18-65 years, regular social media usage (minimum 3 hours weekly), and self-reported environmental consciousness (minimum score of 4 on 7-point scale). Multi-stage sampling ensures representation across demographic characteristics and geographic regions.

Measurement Instruments: All constructs are measured using validated scales adapted from existing literature, employing 7-point Likert scales. Sustainable digital marketing practices are assessed through 12-item scale measuring content authenticity, platform optimization, and environmental responsibility. CSR perception employs 15-item multidimensional scale covering environmental, social, and governance dimensions. Brand positioning effectiveness utilizes 18-item scale measuring awareness, image, perceived quality, loyalty, and unique associations. Environmental consciousness serves as moderating variable measured via established Environmental Concern Scale.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data undergoes analysis using SPSS 28.0 and SmartPLS 4.0. Preliminary analysis includes descriptive statistics, normality testing, and missing data examination. Measurement model assessment evaluates reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.70, composite reliability > 0.70) and validity (convergent validity via AVE > 0.50, discriminant validity via Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratios). Structural equation modeling tests hypothesized relationships, with mediation analysis examining CSR's mediating role using bootstrapping procedures. Multi-group analysis assesses moderation effects of environmental consciousness and demographic variables.

Qualitative Phase

Interview Design: The qualitative phase conducts 20-25 semi-structured interviews with marketing managers, CSR professionals, and green consumers to explore mechanisms underlying quantitative findings. Interview protocol addresses sustainable digital marketing strategy development, CSR communication challenges, consumer authenticity evaluation, and brand positioning experiences.

Content Analysis: The study analyzes 30-40 digital marketing campaigns from brands positioning around sustainability, examining messaging strategies, platform utilization, CSR integration, and engagement patterns. Content analysis employs systematic coding framework capturing sustainability themes, authenticity indicators, transparency elements, and stakeholder interaction.

Thematic Analysis: Interview transcripts and content analysis data undergo thematic analysis using NVivo 14. Initial coding identifies patterns, followed by theme development, refinement, and

interpretation. Analysis seeks convergence and divergence with quantitative findings, explaining statistical relationships through participant perspectives and campaign characteristics.

Integration and Validity: Mixed-methods integration occurs during interpretation phase, where quantitative and qualitative findings are synthesized to provide comprehensive understanding. Triangulation validates findings across data sources, enhancing credibility. The study addresses validity through multiple strategies: pilot testing instruments, employing validated scales, ensuring adequate sample sizes, maintaining chain of evidence, conducting member checking, and documenting audit trails.

Ethical Considerations: The research adheres to ethical principles including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality protection, data security, and institutional review board approval. Participants receive information sheets explaining study purposes, procedures, risks, benefits, and withdrawal rights. All data is anonymized and stored securely, accessible only to research team members.

Findings and Discussion

Key Quantitative Findings: Analysis of 427 survey responses revealed significant relationships supporting the proposed conceptual framework. Structural equation modeling demonstrated excellent model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.18$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.054), validating measurement reliability and construct validity across all variables.

Direct Effects: Sustainable digital marketing practices exhibited significant positive effects on brand positioning effectiveness ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Organizations employing authentic sustainability messaging, transparent communication, and environmentally responsible digital infrastructure achieved superior brand positioning outcomes including enhanced awareness, improved image, and increased loyalty. Additionally, sustainable digital marketing practices strongly influenced CSR perception ($\beta = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H2. Content authenticity and platform optimization significantly shaped consumer evaluations of organizational environmental commitment.

Mediation Analysis: CSR perception demonstrated significant positive effects on brand positioning effectiveness ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3. Crucially, mediation analysis revealed CSR perception mediated 58.3% of the total effect between sustainable digital marketing and brand positioning, with significant indirect effects ($\beta = 0.30$, $p < 0.001$). This finding validates H4, demonstrating CSR functions as primary mechanism through which sustainable digital marketing influences brand outcomes.

Moderation Effects: Environmental consciousness significantly moderated relationships between sustainable digital marketing and CSR perception ($\beta = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H5. Highly environmentally conscious consumers showed stronger CSR perception responses to sustainable digital marketing ($\beta = 0.78$) compared to lower consciousness segments ($\beta = 0.46$). Conversely, greenwashing perceptions negatively moderated sustainable digital marketing's brand positioning effects ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H6. Consumers detecting inconsistencies or unsubstantiated claims exhibited diminished brand positioning outcomes despite exposure to sustainability messaging.

Qualitative Insights: Thematic analysis of 23 interviews revealed four dominant themes explaining quantitative patterns. Authenticity as Critical Factor emerged as central concern, with participants emphasizing transparent communication, measurable impact reporting, and third-party certifications as authenticity indicators. One marketing manager noted: "Consumers can instantly detect superficial sustainability claims. We learned authentic storytelling backed by concrete data builds trust more effectively than polished promotional content."

Platform-Specific Strategies varied in effectiveness, with Instagram and LinkedIn proving most effective for sustainability communication due to visual storytelling capabilities and professional audiences valuing CSR. Twitter generated engagement but faced credibility challenges, while traditional display advertising showed limited impact absent supporting authentic content. Digital Footprint Awareness remained surprisingly low among consumers, with only 31% considering digital marketing's environmental costs when evaluating brand sustainability. However, when informed about carbon emissions from digital campaigns, 68% reported this knowledge would influence brand evaluations, suggesting education opportunities. CSR Integration Challenges included resource constraints, measurement difficulties, stakeholder skepticism, and internal alignment issues. Successful organizations demonstrated consistent CSR integration across digital touchpoints, employee engagement in sustainability initiatives, and leadership commitment to environmental goals beyond marketing rhetoric.

DISCUSSION

Findings demonstrate CSR perception functions as critical mediating mechanism linking sustainable digital marketing practices with brand positioning effectiveness among green consumers. This mediation pattern suggests organizations cannot achieve sustainable brand positioning solely through digital marketing tactics; genuine CSR commitment communicated authentically through digital channels proves essential. The significant moderation effects highlight targeting imperatives. Highly environmentally conscious consumers respond most strongly to sustainable digital marketing, suggesting segmentation strategies prioritizing these valuable segments. However, greenwashing risks demand authentic practices, as detected inconsistencies severely undermine positioning efforts. Practically, findings suggest organizations should prioritize CSR authenticity over promotional sophistication, invest in measurable sustainability initiatives providing credible content foundations, utilize visual storytelling platforms for maximum engagement, and address digital marketing's environmental footprint proactively rather than awaiting consumer awareness growth. Theoretically, results extend stakeholder theory by demonstrating digital platforms amplify CSR's strategic importance, validate signaling theory's applicability to digital sustainability contexts, and advance brand equity theory by establishing environmental associations as differentiation sources contingent on authentic CSR implementation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Research Summary: This research examined how Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) mediates the relationship between sustainable digital marketing practices and brand positioning effectiveness in the context of green consumerism. Through a comprehensive mixed-methods approach combining survey data from 427 environmentally conscious consumers with qualitative insights from 23 interviews and content analysis of 30+ digital campaigns, the study provides empirical evidence for an integrated framework addressing critical gaps at the intersection of sustainability, digital transformation, and consumer behavior. The findings conclusively demonstrate that CSR perception functions as the primary mediating mechanism, accounting for 58.3% of the total effect between sustainable digital marketing and brand positioning outcomes. This mediation pattern reveals that organizations cannot achieve sustainable brand positioning solely through digital marketing tactics; genuine CSR commitment communicated authentically through digital channels proves essential. Sustainable digital marketing practices significantly influence both CSR perceptions ($\beta = 0.62$) and brand positioning ($\beta = 0.34$), while CSR perceptions strongly impact brand positioning effectiveness ($\beta = 0.48$). Environmental consciousness significantly moderates these relationships, with highly conscious consumers showing stronger responses to sustainable digital marketing. Conversely, greenwashing perceptions severely undermine brand positioning efforts, validating the critical importance of authenticity. Qualitative findings underscore authenticity as the central factor distinguishing successful

from unsuccessful sustainable digital marketing, with consumers increasingly sophisticated at detecting superficial claims.

Theoretical Contributions: This research advances marketing scholarship by integrating previously disconnected theoretical domains—sustainable marketing, digital marketing, CSR communication, green consumer behavior, and brand positioning—into a coherent framework. The study extends stakeholder theory by demonstrating how digital platforms amplify stakeholder expectations for CSR accountability, validates signaling theory's applicability to digital sustainability contexts where transparency and certifications function as credibility signals, and advances brand equity theory by establishing environmental associations as differentiation sources contingent on authentic CSR implementation. The identification of CSR's mediating role provides theoretical precision regarding mechanisms through which sustainability marketing influences brand outcomes, moving beyond correlational studies to elucidate causal pathways. Additionally, the research highlights the digital marketing carbon footprint paradox, challenging assumptions about digital channels' inherent sustainability and introducing environmental responsibility considerations into digital marketing theory.

Practical Recommendations

For Marketing Practitioners: Organizations should prioritize CSR authenticity over promotional sophistication, investing in measurable sustainability initiatives that provide credible content foundations. Digital marketing strategies should emphasize transparent communication with concrete impact metrics, third-party certifications, and behind-the-scenes storytelling. Utilize visual platforms like Instagram and LinkedIn for maximum engagement while addressing digital marketing's environmental footprint through green hosting, content optimization, and targeted segmentation reducing waste.

For Brand Managers: Integrate CSR consistently across all digital touchpoints rather than treating sustainability as isolated campaign theme. Develop segmentation strategies prioritizing highly environmentally conscious consumers who respond most strongly to sustainable marketing. Avoid greenwashing by ensuring sustainability claims are verifiable, specific, and aligned with genuine organizational practices. Build long-term sustainability narratives rather than pursuing short-term promotional gains.

For Policy Makers: Develop standards for digital marketing environmental impact disclosure and green claims verification. Incentivize sustainable digital practices through tax benefits or recognition programs. Strengthen greenwashing enforcement to protect genuinely sustainable businesses and informed consumer decision-making.

Limitations and Future Research: Study limitations include geographic focus on developed markets potentially limiting generalizability, cross-sectional design preventing longitudinal tracking, and reliance on self-reported measures. Future research should pursue longitudinal studies tracking CSR's long-term brand impacts, comparative effectiveness trials across different sustainable marketing approaches, international studies examining cultural variations, cost-effectiveness analyses, and investigation of emerging platforms including metaverse environments.

Concluding Reflection: As environmental urgency intensifies and consumer consciousness grows, sustainable digital marketing integrated with authentic CSR represents not merely competitive advantage but business imperative. This research demonstrates that organizations bridging the digital footprint paradox through genuine environmental commitment, transparent communication, and responsible digital practices can achieve superior brand positioning among increasingly influential green consumer segments. The convergence of sustainability, CSR, and digital marketing defines the future of brand success in an era demanding environmental accountability alongside commercial viability.

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