

# When Sustainability Becomes Strategy: Rethinking the Marketing Mix



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## Abstract

In this study, the evolving function of sustainability in marketing strategy is analyzed based on the emergence of sustainability as the new "eighth" P in the marketing mix paradigm. Analyzing interdisciplinary literature ranging from 2015 to 2026, the research studies how the concept of sustainability evolves from merely being an activity related to communicating and reporting about corporate performance to a strategic governance approach influencing marketing decision-making. Based on an extensive body of literature dedicated to such concepts as sustainability marketing, ESG reporting, greenwashing, greenhushing, sustainability governance, and competitive advantage, the research identifies three main stages of sustainability evolution: symbolic addition, strategic differentiation, and integrated governance architecture. At the symbolic stage, sustainability represents mostly a tool of communication; at the stage of strategic differentiation, it influences product, price, place, and promotion aspects of marketing. Lastly, at the integrated stage, sustainability evolves into a cross-cutting governance approach underlying marketing decisions. Moreover, the research proves that the degree to which sustainability is incorporated varies depending on regulatory requirements, stakeholders' pressure, feasibility to measure, and the depth of governance in respective industries. By differentiating sustainability from Corporate Social Responsibility and ESG measurement systems, the paper advances marketing theory by viewing the marketing mix as a strategic governance system.

**Keywords:** Sustainability; Marketing Mix; Competitive Advantage; ESG Integration; Greenwashing; Greenhushing

## 1. Introduction

The concept of sustainability has gradually shifted from being a corporate social responsibility to becoming a key strategy that influences today's business and marketing decisions. This has been facilitated by the increasing environmental issues, heightened stakeholder demands, organizational pressure, and increased governance needs within different industries around the world. In the past ten years, companies have been under increasing scrutiny by different stakeholders on how their activities impact the environment and society. As such, sustainability is no longer seen as an ethical issue but rather as an important aspect of competitiveness and organizational resilience (Haider et al., 2022; Verma & Diwan, 2025).

On the other hand, organizations in all industries have also hastened their embracement of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) policies as well as sustainable reporting standards. While it is true that this demonstrates the organization's commitment to the principles of sustainability, a considerable percentage of the initiatives aimed at achieving sustainability have actually focused more on communication and compliance than implementation (Bernal Salazar et al., 2025; Charitou & Yoon, 2025). In several

instances, sustainability continues to be seen as an additional pursuit that is carried out via standalone systems of reporting, corporate communication, or branding, but does not involve transforming core business activities, governance practices, or value creation systems. This divergence between the rhetoric of sustainability and its underlying practice has made people worry about greenwashing and greenhushing. In greenwashing, corporations tend to exaggerate their sustainable practices, while in greenhushing, they under communicate their sustainability efforts (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Montgomery et al., 2024). These conflicts have sparked critical issues surrounding the validity, strategic depth, and sustainability of corporate sustainability initiatives.

Within the marketing field, sustainability has become a burgeoning academic field, especially with the emergence of green marketing, sustainable consumption, stakeholder marketing, and ESG branding initiatives. Research has greatly enhanced the body of knowledge concerning the role of environmental and social factors in shaping consumer behavior, brand perceptions, product innovation, and communication strategies. Yet, the bulk of the marketing for sustainability research literature still views sustainability as an add-on or

amendment to the basic elements of the marketing mix instead of a new strategic paradigm that can redefine the entire marketing system itself (Papadas et al., 2017; Pomeroy & Johnson, 2018). However, in most cases, sustainability can be defined using such marketing tools like environment-friendly products, sustainable packaging, and green prices, ethical sourcing, and sustainability-based promotion campaigns. Despite the contribution to responsible marketing activities, these modifications remain largely tactical and disconnected from organization-wide strategic management frameworks and corporate governance.

In the complex modern business environment, where companies have to consider various factors including profitability, environment, stakeholders, and society, the gaps in existing marketing mix theories become obvious. There is little knowledge concerning how sustainability may affect strategic decisions-making, corporate governance, competitive positioning, and cross-functional cooperation among departments within companies. Moreover, existing theories do not explain why different organizations pursue sustainability differently from symbolic sustainability reporting to a sophisticated and deeply integrated governance-oriented sustainability architecture.

In view of this, the aim of the current study is to address this gap in theoretical research and strategic practice by conceptualizing sustainability as a possible eighth P of the marketing mix. This paper analyzes how sustainability has become increasingly more strategic and governance-oriented phenomenon in modern business rather than being considered as just a method of reporting. In order to develop a staged conceptualization of different sustainability integrations ranging from symbolic to strategic, interdisciplinary literature is reviewed and analyzed. In result, a staged framework of evolving sustainability integrations is constructed based on literature from different industries. This framework depicts sustainability as one of the components of the marketing mix that may transform marketing mix to a flexible strategic management tool.

## 2. Methodology

The current study utilizes the comprehensive literature review methodology to investigate the role of sustainability in the marketing strategy and marketing mix. It is relevant because the study requires the synthesis of both theoretical and empirical findings to construct a systematic conceptual framework. The time frame for the review covers the literature from 2015 to 2026, which is characterized by the rising interest of academics in sustainability marketing, ESG

management, greenwashing, greenhushing, and business strategy sustainability. The relevant sources were selected through a search in Scopus and Google Scholar using keywords such as "sustainability marketing," "green marketing," "marketing mix," "ESG integration," "corporate governance," "greenwashing," "greenhushing," "CSR," and "sustainable competitive advantage." The criteria for selection included peer-reviewed journal articles, conceptual articles, empirical studies, and literature reviews on the topics of marketing, sustainability, ESG, CSR, corporate governance, and business strategy (Papadas et al., 2017; Purvis et al., 2019). In contrast, non-peer-reviewed sources, duplicated materials, inaccessible articles, and those unrelated to business and marketing management were not included in the analysis. The selected literature was evaluated through thematic and comparative analysis. The major themes include sustainability marketing, ESG management, CSR versus sustainability, greenwashing concerns, stakeholder legitimacy, competitive advantage, and cross-sector sustainability integration. From the analyzed themes, a three-phase conceptual framework – symbolic addition, strategic differentiation, and governance architecture – was created to explain the evolution of sustainability from marketing into strategic governance.

## 3. Evolution of Sustainability in Business Strategy

The development of sustainability within the framework of business strategy can be viewed as a story of evolution of business organizations which have progressed from managing legitimacy to integrating sustainability into their business strategies. At the time of the emergence of CSR concept, businesses were more concerned about compliance, maintaining reputation, and mitigating risks, and tended to keep good practices isolated from their core value creation processes (ElAlfy et al., 2020; Macchion, 2024). Recently, research on CSR has moved away from the old concept of CSR being only a kind of window dressing and framed it as a deep and multi-stage CSR development where companies begin with giving away and defensive tactics, but then get into strategic alignment and, in exceptional cases, they create new business models (Abidin et al., 2025). Meanwhile, environmental, social, and governance (ESG) frameworks have evolved from being minimal tools for voluntary disclosure to more standardized, financially relevant mechanisms that impact capital allocation, risk assessment, and long-term evaluation of firms (Ahmad et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2025). Institutional ESG has successfully turned sustainability from something that was just 'nice to have' or 'good for

public relations' into a strategic factor that can influence corporate decision frameworks.

Initially, when sustainability came under the spotlight in strategic discussions, its arguments were shifting to creating value, resilience, and innovation. Empirical synthesis indicates that there is a positive internal correlation between the three dimensions of sustainability and corporate financial performance, particularly if environmental and social risk issues are treated as components of the overall risk management framework (Hristov et al., 2022; Settembre-Blundo et al., 2021). The governance tools such as board monitoring and the development of KPIs have played a vital role, as most of the activities have slowly turned toward sustainability. The linking of executives' compensation to the long-term benefits of the stockholders are some instances (Hristov et al., 2022). However, on the other hand, innovations, sustainability, digital traceability, and circular business models have been recognized as the major determinants that differentiate a business from others. These are not just reactions to compliance (Alkaraan et al., 2024; Silvestre et al., 2022). Together, these changes in the path of accommodating nature, move away from the mentality that sustainability is merely a constraint or an ethical duty to become a core organizing principle that radically changes how businesses perceive competitive advantage, resilience, and long-term value creation.

### 3.1 Sustainability in Marketing Theory

Sustainability in marketing theory has been looked at through various main lenses, each revealing different aspects of the subject but none of them changing the structure of the marketing mix altogether. Stakeholder theory presents sustainability as the matching of a company's strategy to the expectations and importance of different stakeholder groups, thus environmental and social responsiveness is seen as acquiring legitimacy and creating collaborative value (Hult, 2011; Ozdemir et al., 2023). Institutional theory pictures a company's sustainability actions as a reaction to the green practices, eco, labels, and responsible positioning that are spread across industries through coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017; Kelleci & Yildiz, 2021).

According to resource-based and natural resource-based views, sustainability is a source of outstanding capabilities such as green innovation, supplier integration, and ESG-oriented routines that result in sustained competitive advantage (Andersén, 2021). Signalling theory puts emphasis on the communication of environmental performance by firms under information

asymmetry, thus, sustainability statements, certifications, and branding cues are seen as instruments of gaining trust and being different (Lim, 2016).

Finally, the frameworks of market orientation and green marketing orientation place sustainability at the core as a strategic orientation that influences the processing of information, innovation, and performance, thereby marking internal, strategic, and tactical sustainability dimensions (Lunde, 2018; Negi et al., 2023; Wang, 2020). Through these viewpoints, sustainability is seen as stakeholder alignment, institutional conformity, strategic resource, communicative signal, or organizational orientation. Notwithstanding, it is hardly ever theorized as a constitutive decision domain on parity with product, price, place, or promotion. Even the most recent extensions that bring forth sustainability-centered marketing logics and Green P reframing concede that sustainability is still a concept layered over the existing mix elements rather than being embedded as an explicit structural element of the mix itself (Anthuvan et al., 2026). Lack of this theoretical depth is one of the reasons for the present paper to conceptualize sustainability as the emerging eighth P that can condition and orchestrate the traditional marketing mix.

### 3.2 Greenwashing and Greenhushing Tensions

Greenwashing and greenhushing are two different but structurally intertwined ways of dealing with the increasing focus on sustainability. Greenwashing means the strategic misrepresentation in which a company makes a symbolic environmental claim that is not aligned with the real operational practices. What they do is exaggerate or selectively disclose their sustainability performance to win over the public or to gain a reputational advantage. Studies that investigate the reality show how sustainability reporting and ESG communication are sometimes too far ahead of the real business model transformation, thus creating a credibility gap between the narrative and the material change. One of these symbolic disclosure practices results in opening the corporate world towards greater regulatory scrutiny, damaging the reputation of the company, and financial loss, such as the increased cost of capital when the inconsistencies are made public (Lunde, 2018).

In contrast, greenhushing is deliberately hiding the communication of sustainability initiatives out of fear of stakeholder skepticism being labelled as hypocrites, or political backlash. If verification mechanisms are weak and there is an intensification of scrutiny, firms may view disclosure as more dangerous than silence. Altogether, these forces show that sustainability cannot be stable if it is

treated mainly as a communicative exercise. If sustainability is just a promotional overlay and not an embedded strategic design principle, firms will continue to overstate and be silent alternately. Such a dilemma strengthens the argument for sustainability to be moved past signaling and structurally integrated within core strategic and marketing decisions.

### **3.3 Limitations of the Traditional Marketing Mix Framework**

The conventional 4Ps framework was initially created to bring order and systematize the managerial control over product, price, place, and promotion. Later, the 7Ps in services marketing was an extension to include people, process, and physical evidence as the main factors of service differentiation and experiential value (Batat, 2024). These frameworks were set up to get the best out of exchange efficiency and competitive positioning within firm-centric market systems and therefore they were not intended to regulate environmental or social externalities. Even the most recent attempts to modify the marketing mix for sustainability are still concentrating on the Ps as tools for improving competitive advantage, with sustainability being just an additional consideration and not a main strategic logic (Pomeroy, 2017). Hence, the mix still stays in the realm of transactional optimization instead of addressing systemic trade-offs among environmental, social, and economic dimensions (Purvis et al., 2019).

Inclusions of green marketing serve as another example to reveal this limitation. Sustainability is often broken down to be only at the level of isolated elements of the marketing mix such as eco-friendly product features, green price premiums, sustainable packaging, or environmental communication, thus fragmenting sustainability into mere tactical adjustments instead of making it a part of strategic architecture (Ahmed et al., 2022; Kiyak & Grigoliene, 2023). Use of different extensions of the 7Ps to services and relational exchanges have undoubtedly led to better representational adequacy. However, they still conceive each P as a variable that can be controlled to achieve market performance. As a result, sustainability remains compartmentalized and subordinate to conventional competitive objectives. This structural drawback is the major reason why sustainability should be reconceived not only as a single Ps modifier but as the eighth P that can reconfigure the entire marketing mix.

## **4. Findings and Conceptual Synthesis**

### **4.1 Sustainability as an Emerging Eighth P**

A cross-industry synthesis reveals that sustainability is increasingly considered not just as a factor changing the existing marketing mix

elements but as a separate identifiable strategic domain. A large part of the current practice, however, just places sustainability as a green feature in product characteristics, pricing in the form of premiums, the story of responsible sourcing, or promotions. These overlay approaches break down sustainability into mere tactical changes that still heavily rely on the traditional exchange logic and consumer-facing positioning (García-Salirrosas & Rondon-Eusebio, 2022; Majeed et al., 2022; Sharma, 2021). Refined green marketing frameworks usually focus on the rebalancing of traditional P's without really changing the underlying decision architecture for which, therefore, sustainability is maintained as a simple differentiation tool rather than a controlling strategic criterion (Dyck & Manchanda, 2021; Lim, 2016). Such instrumental layering is one of the factors that lead to conceptual ambiguity and isolated implementation, which is a problem that sustainability marketing scholarship has been identifying repeatedly (Davies et al., 2020; Kemper & Ballantine, 2019).

However, referring to sustainability as a new eighth P implies that it is a different area of decisions, which has its own goals, constraints and evaluation principles. The eighth P no longer represents product or promotion selections that one can reduce to, but rather it is a vehicle that reshapes sustainability as a structural layer that influences the way in which trade-offs are evaluated among all mix variables. Such a perspective is consistent with the idea of treating sustainability marketing as the strategic creation, communication, and delivery of value that justifiably considers, at the strategic level, the environmental and social impacts (Lunde, 2018; Madhavaram & Nirjar, 2025). Assigning sustainability as a separate P makes clear the aspect of accountability, facilitates the merger of governance and capability development into marketing strategy, and differentiates the symbolic signaling from the substantive integration (Demirel & Kesidou, 2019; Madhavaram & Nirjar, 2025). By doing this, sustainability ceases to be merely a decorating feature that can be imposed on the mix tactics, rather it becomes a fundamental component of the marketing structure, thus allowing the competitive positioning to be in line over time with the economic, environmental, and social value creation on a consistent basis.

### **4.2 Three Stages of Sustainability Integration**

Incorporation of insights obtained from the different sectors suggests that there is considerable variation in how organizations include sustainability in their marketing efforts. This variation requires the adoption of a staging approach that can address issues related to

differences in terms of integration level, strategic significance, and maturity in governance practices. It is important to use the staging approach in order to comprehend how sustainability evolved from being a simple strategic aspect to becoming an architectural logic (Davies et al., 2020).

4.2.1 Stage 1 – Symbolic Addition.

It seems at the current moment sustainability may become the eighth P that can be achieved via communication and leadership. The firms create more sustainable products, they engage in ethical marketing or ESG reporting, all together with the standard marketing mix providing a unified message to the stakeholders. However, the integration has happened primarily on a tactical level, and sustainability is used solely as a means of reputational management. In this case, the communications and operations gap is very evident, and therefore the danger of greenwashing/greenhushing cases is quite high.

4.2.2 Stage 2 – Strategic Differentiation.

Sustainability began to have an influence on the marketing mix through the product, price, place, and brand dimensions. This makes the business distinguish itself from its competitors not merely by using a "green" logo. Besides, there is additional change in the internal processes, and there is a closer fit between communication and business. However, sustainability could become a strategic weapon rather than a managerial constraint.

4.2.3 Stage 3 – Integrated Architecture.

Those companies which excel in this regard have embedded the concept of sustainability in all the elements of the marketing mix rather than treating it as a standalone element. As such, it alters the nature of reconsideration of trade-offs, value proposition formulation, and management of stakeholder relationships in the long run. In order to make their sustainability objectives compatible with marketing decisions, governance, performance measurements, and incentives have been employed. This results in the elimination of gaps in communications as well as embedding sustainability as an integrative strategy for all organizations (Hristov et al., 2022).

These phases should not be understood as fixed categories only. It is possible that companies will display characteristics of several stages simultaneously. However, the phases denote the layering of structural depth, the rise in strategic centrality, the decrease in symbolic imbalance, and the intensification of governance integration. Thus, sustainability gradually changes from a distinct strategic layer to a completely integrated framework governing all elements of the marketing mix. Figure 1 illustrates the staged progression of sustainability integration within marketing strategy, demonstrating the transition from symbolic addition to strategic differentiation and ultimately to integrated governance architecture.

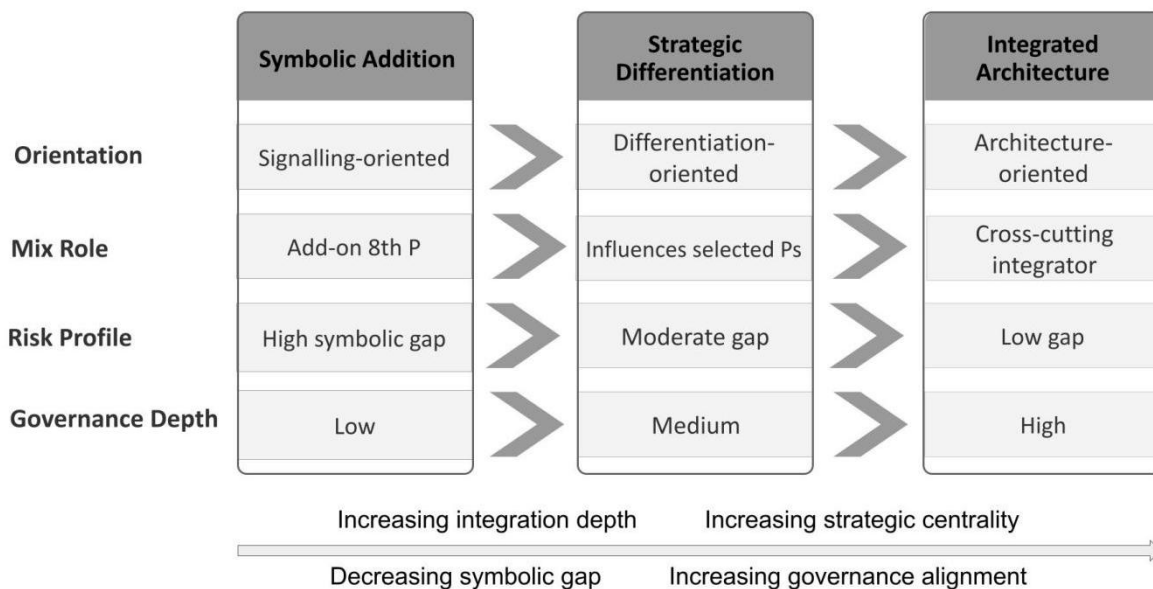


Figure 1. Evolution of Sustainability Integration in the Marketing Mix

4.3 Cross-Industry Patterns

Sustainability integration does not move uniformly across the sectors; instead, it is grouped around the industry-specific governance logics which are

determined by the four factors, regulatory intensity, stakeholder visibility, capital market exposure, and innovation architecture. As illustrated in Table 1, regulation, heavy infrastructure and financial sectors are more likely to institutionalize

sustainability at the formal governance structures, risk frameworks, and reporting systems levels, thus they reflect coercive and capital-driven pressures. On the other hand, consumer-facing industries quite often initiate sustainability through branding, packaging, and product-level differentiation before making it an enterprise-wide initiative. Innovation-driven sectors reveal a hybrid pattern, where

sustainability is becoming more a part of process design and digital traceability systems, however, the level varies significantly between the firms. The extractive industries are a good example of very old-fashioned reporting architectures along with the continuation of the structural antagonism between core business models and long-term transition commitments (Negi et al., 2023).

Table 1. Cross-Industry Variation in Sustainability Integration

Industry Cluster (Examples)	Dominant Stage (Most Common)	Primary Driver (Dominant)	Integration Depth	Communication-Reality Gap	Strategic Outcome (Most Visible)
Regulation-heavy infrastructure (Hristov et al., 2022)	Stage 2 progressing toward Stage 3 (jurisdiction and firm dependent)	Regulatory mandates, transition-risk scrutiny, system legitimacy	Medium to High (formalised ESG governance, board oversight, integrated reporting, transition planning)	Medium to High (pledge-implementation gaps; decoupling risk under scrutiny)	Licence to operate, risk mitigation, transition credibility, capital access
Finance (Banking, Insurance, Asset Management)(Zhao et al., 2025)	Stage 2 (Stage 3 among leading institutions)	Capital market expectations, disclosure regimes, prudential risk governance	Medium (strong governance and reporting integration; uneven real-economy embedding)	Medium (risk of box-ticking ESG and selective disclosure)	Funding advantage, portfolio de-risking, regulatory legitimacy
Consumer Brand Sectors (FMCG, Retail, Fashion) (Sharma, 2021)	Stage 1 to Stage 2 (often marketing-led first)	Consumer visibility, retailer pressure, NGO activism, reputational exposure	Low to Medium (product design, packaging, selective SSCM upgrades; enterprise-wide integration limited)	High (exposure to greenwashing accusations; episodic greenhushing in sensitive markets)	Differentiation, brand equity, legitimacy gains when operationally substantiated
Innovation-led Sectors (Technology, Advanced Manufacturing) (Alkaraan et al., 2024)	Stage 2 (with pockets of Stage 3 in leaders)	Innovation capability, stakeholder scrutiny, emissions measurability, Industry 4.0/5.0 integration	Medium (process redesign, digital traceability, efficiency gains; Scope 3 integration challenging)	Medium (measurement constraints; techno-optimistic over-claims risk)	Efficiency rents, innovation legitimacy, resilience through traceability and sustainable manufacturing capabilities
Innovation-led Regulated Science Sectors (Pharmaceuticals) (Anthuvan et al., 2026)	Stage 2 (select Stage 3 leaders)	Compliance systems, stakeholder legitimacy, supplier standards,	Medium (quality systems facilitate ESG integration; heterogeneity across firms)	Medium (disclosure-performance mismatch risk within complex	Regulatory legitimacy, supplier discipline, risk control, selective

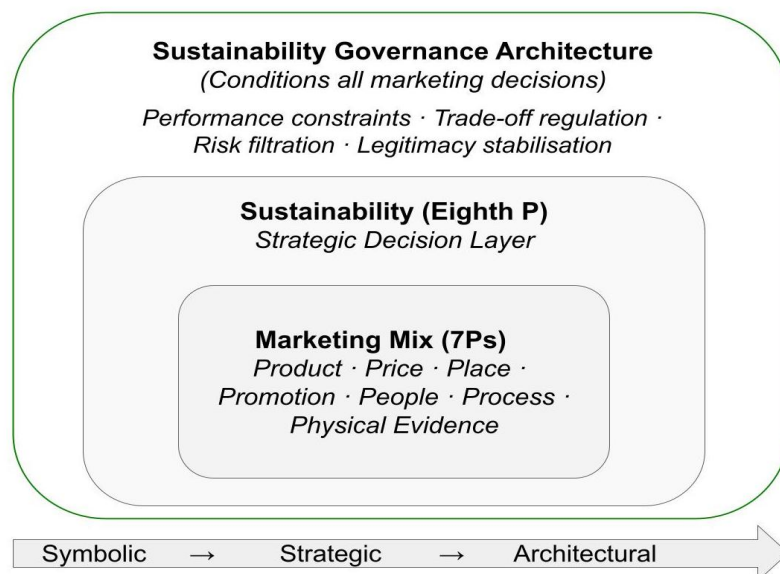
		regulatory expectations		global supply chains)	competitive differentiation
Extractive / Resource-Intensive (Mining, Oil & Gas) (Bhandari et al., 2022)	Stage 1 to Stage 2 (reporting often ahead of transformation)	Licence-to-operate pressure, investor scrutiny, regulatory compliance	Low to Medium (formal reporting maturity; core portfolio transition limited)	High (structural credibility challenges; comparability and decoupling risks)	Social acceptance, risk containment, incremental transition positioning

Most clusters share a common pattern in which the dominant stage of integration reflects the relative balance between symbolic visibility and operational measurability. Sectors that require heavy regulatory involvement and sectors that are considered extractive implement formal systems of ESG governance and reporting but still stay vulnerable to risks of decoupling due to implementation issues. Sectors of consumer brands are prone to higher signals since these sectors operate in highly monitored environments due to the complexity of their global supply chains. Sectors of innovation orientation are typically operationally oriented towards sustainability as these sectors align with energy efficiency, digitalization, and manufacturing revolution. Still, the governance integration in such sectors stays at the same level or varies. This differentiation means that the level of maturity regarding sustainability is somewhat dependent on willpower but primarily on the structural congruence of external incentives, operationally measurable levers, and internal governance(Charitou & Yoon, 2025). In general, differences between sectors constitute a strong case for treating sustainability not as an additional overlay over marketing variables. The diversity of differences regarding the depth of

governance, gaps between signals and reality, and strategic results provides sufficient justification for considering sustainability as the eighth decision-making domain. Such an approach is helpful in addressing the shift of sustainability from being a mere signaling instrument to becoming a governance structure. This shift concerns the trade-off between different logics of product, price, innovation, and capital allocation rather than just being a supplementary part of the mix.

**4.4 Proposed Conceptual Model**

The previous analyses come together in a structural reconceptualization of sustainability in marketing theory. Instead of viewing sustainability as a mere extension to the traditional 7Ps framework, the model sees it as a developing idea whose function changes along with organizational maturity. Sustainability moves from being a separate explicit decision area to becoming a cross-cutting governance framework that influences the rationale of marketing decisions. Figure 2 presents the proposed structural model depicting the evolution of sustainability from an identifiable eighth marketing variable to an overarching governance architecture conditioning the marketing mix.



**Figure 2.** From Eighth P to Governance Architecture: Structural Evolution of Sustainability in the Marketing Mix.

During the first stages of integration, sustainability is still seen as an additional feature or dimension. In this setup, it is like an identifiable eighth P, which marketing planning visually and strategically highlights. It is mainly employed for signaling, differentiating, and establishing one's reputation. Despite the fact that sustainability plays a role in decision-making, it remains conceptually separated from the core marketing mix and therefore stands alongside product, price, place, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence without fundamentally altering their structural logic (Kiyak & Grigoliene, 2023).

With organizational integration developing, sustainability has gradually become at the heart of corporate strategy. By now, it is not only a point of communication but a factor in decision-making that impacts the whole marketing mix. At a very high level of maturity, sustainability is not even a separate strategic component but is fully incorporated as a governance framework. Here, it dictates marketing decisions in advance rather than just verifying them later.

Within its governance configuration, sustainability simultaneously:

1. As a performance constraint it limits the range of strategic options considered acceptable;
2. A governance filter it selects decisions that meet environmental and social criteria;
3. A trade-off regulator it moderates the disagreements among cost, growth, innovation, and legitimacy;
4. A legitimacy stabilizer it keeps the company's behavior in line with the expectations of stakeholders and regulators.

The main idea of the article lies in the theoretical move that it explains sustainability is not simply a

new aspect of the marketing mix brought in a quantitative way but that it fundamentally alters the whole marketing mix. The change of an extra element to a strategic differentiator and finally to a governance framework shows that a decision variable which is visible becomes a decision infrastructure that is invisible. To resolve the contradiction between green overlay approaches and governance-based sustainability perspectives, the reframing by a staged maturity logic combined with a cross-industry variation also works. The pictorial model depicts sustainability becoming a) a symbolic stage, b) a deeply ingrained stage of architectural conditioning, thus the sustainable marketing theory is refashioned a concept of integration deeply embedded in the structure.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Sustainability as Structural Conditioning

In this regard, the new conceptualization contributes to the theory of the marketing mix in terms of sustainability not just being a reaction to market forces, but rather a precondition that governs marketing decisions. Previous theoretical expansions of the marketing mix concept have integrated sustainability in a manner where it has been viewed as a greener version of an already established component or a minor adjustment to the existing concept without changing its core essence (Pomering, 2017). These incremental models are valuable when the concept is still evolving, but they are unable to capture how sustainability can alter the structure of the marketing mix itself. Once sustainability becomes firmly rooted within the concept, it acts as a governance model that guides the evaluation and prioritization of product development, price strategy, channel selection,

promotion, stakeholder relationships, and processes. As a result, sustainability changes from a marketing tool into a central principle guiding competitive positioning, legitimacy, and long-term value creation (Silvestre et al., 2022).

This model of architecture further helps to distinguish between sustainability and CSR & ESG, and also sheds light on the context when sustainability takes on strategic importance. Whereas CSR & ESG have been linked to the concepts of responsibility articulation, disclosure, metrics, and accountability, sustainability in the current model has been perceived as a governance practice that occurs pre-emptively within marketing decisions. This can be achieved when sustainability enjoys the support of formal governance frameworks, cross-departmental practices, incentives, and strategic oversight within organizations (Hristov et al., 2022). However, in situations where there is low institutional pressure or internal capability, the concept of sustainability tends to remain symbolic or differentiation-oriented, aligning with criticism towards sustainability marketing as fragmented. Hence, the value of this model does not only lie in recognizing sustainability as the eighth P but also in describing how it evolves into a governing architecture that shapes the other 7Ps.

### 5.2 Distinguishing Sustainability, CSR, and ESG

This conceptual framework relies on making a distinction between the concepts of sustainability, corporate social responsibility (CSR) and environmental, social and governance (ESG) frameworks. These terms are often used interchangeably. However, they differ from each other in their level of application, goal and governance logic. The notion of corporate social responsibility is based on normative responsibility, commitment to ethical principles, stakeholder orientation and corporate citizenship. According to recent research, CSR often includes such components as moral positioning and reputational legitimacy. These elements refer to the firm's economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibility. Yet, CSR does not act as a decision-making system (Andersén, 2021).

On the contrary, ESG has its roots in corporate finance and investment assessment. It is aimed at providing metrics for the transformation of environmental and social aspects into indicators of governance, disclosure rules, ratings, investment screening, risk management and valuation (Montgomery et al., 2024). While ESG helps to enhance comparability, its logic is still evaluative and ex post because it evaluates performance by applying measurement tools while not defining the strategy. In its turn, the concept of sustainability, as

described in this paper, implies strategic thinking and governance logic. It can be defined as an integrative approach that combines environmental, social and economic considerations as part of corporate strategy, operations, resource allocation and marketing architecture. Thus, the hierarchy of concepts can be seen as CSR – normative responsibility, ESG – tools of measurement and governance, sustainability – strategic logic.

### 5.3 Maturity Conditions and Integration Depth

This makes the staged maturity rationale of the framework more compelling. Initially, the relationship between sustainability and CSR/ESG is strong, implying the vulnerability of the former to symbolic adoption and greenwashing. In the more advanced state of integration, sustainability metrics affect governance processes, boardroom practices, performance management, and risk assessment practices, bridging sustainability discourse with sustainable organization behaviors. In the most mature stage, sustainability transcends both obligation-based discourse and ESG reporting into a pre-communicational and -measurable ex-ante governance criterion shaping marketing strategy trade-offs.

There is empirical evidence supporting the suggested categorization as well since CSR communication tends to focus on obligations, ESG measures emphasize financial performance for investors, while sustainability is more aligned with a societal mission and strategic orientation (Bernal Salazar et al., 2025). Accordingly, the structural integration of sustainability depends on governance depth rather than on disclosures per se, the incentives for such integration, and cross-functional capacity building. With regard to the theoretical coherence of the framework, it is necessary to recognize that corporate sustainability cannot be conflated with CSR or confused with ESG compliance either. On the contrary, corporate sustainability can be described as decision-conditioning governance that, once reaching its peak of maturity, changes the structure of the marketing mix and positioning based on the simultaneous value creation in three areas.

### 5.4 Boundary Conditions for Structural Integration

Several boundary conditions exist that determine the success of translating sustainability into a governance structure. First, institutional pressure impacts the degree of integration. Sustainability will be embedded only in cases where there is sufficient institutional pressure due to regulation or capital concerns. In cases where there are weak institutions or poor stakeholder pressures, the organization is less likely to adopt an active approach towards

sustainability but rather remain in symbolic and differentiation phases. Second, internal capacity within organizations allows sustainability practices to become an actual decision-making mechanism instead of being an add-on after the process is completed. With internal governance structures, the firm can mitigate both greenwashing and greenhushing risks (Lim, 2016).

Third, sustainability measurability plays a role in whether it can be translated into a management practice. Firms in sectors where there are easily measurable aspects of operations can incorporate sustainability as an element that guides their strategy and marketing processes. However, other firms with complex global value chain operations can experience ambiguity in their approaches to adopting the practice. Lastly, sustainability strategic centrality determines how the practice is incorporated. When sustainability ties into innovative, cost-efficient, risk-reducing, and stakeholder legitimacy strategies, the firm is better placed to implement it strategically and therefore create a structure that includes sustainability among its elements.

## 6. Implications

Some of the main implications of this paper for managers, responsible entrepreneurs, and future researchers can be outlined as follows. For managers, sustainability is not supposed to be considered simply a communication strategy topic. It should be incorporated into all strategic decisions related to the choice of products, pricing logic, suppliers, channels, risk management practices, organizational governance models, and incentive systems. Incorporating sustainability into cross-functional strategies can help businesses build strong corporate reputation and avoid greenwashing while creating sustainable competitive advantage thanks to innovation, cost savings, and increased long-term value for stakeholders. For responsible entrepreneurs, sustainability must be an integral part of their business model from day one. This approach can be beneficial for start-ups and SMEs by helping them build transparent, environmentally, and socially responsible products, pricing, supply chains, and other aspects of operations and relationships with customers and investors, thus gaining trust and responsible investments and avoiding potential future problems related to legislation and losing competitiveness. Future empirical research may test sustainability as the eighth P and consider its effect on the relationship between traditional marketing mix variables and performance results. Further empirical research can test the effect of regulatory pressure and organizational sustainability

governance depth on sustainability maturity and operational measurability.

## 7. Conclusion

This study views sustainability in a different way as it considers it not only a reporting tool, a CSR statement, or a way to simply add on tactics, but a decision-conditioning strategic logic that is deeply embedded in the marketing mix. A synthesis of different industries shows a process where a symbolic addition gradually changes into a strategic differentiation and then to an integrated governance system, where sustainability not only is the eighth P but also becomes a cross-cutting principle that simultaneously influences the product design, pricing logic, channel transparency and stakeholder engagement. Although the extent of corporate embedding of the structures varies somewhat, it is most clearly demonstrated where these three aspects: regulatory pressure, operational measurability, and governance depth, converge. Firstly, the paper makes a clear distinction between the three notions: sustainability, CSR, and ESG measurement systems, and in doing so, it brings conceptual clearness as well as a re-thinking of the marketing mix as an agile framework. The model presented here, despite being conceptual and in need of empirical verification, offers a rational base for subsequent experiments and it depicts sustainability as a strategic focus that the concept of competitive advantage and the creation of long-term value can be systematically aligned with.

## Statement of Declarations

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### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Ethical Approval

This study is conceptual in nature and is based exclusively on previously published literature. It did not involve human participants, primary data collection, or institutional review procedures; therefore, ethical approval was not required.

## Data Availability

No new data were generated or analyzed in this study. All sources supporting the findings are cited in the reference list.

## Author Contributions

Thamburaj Anthuvan conceived the study, developed the conceptual framework, and led the writing and revision of the manuscript. Kajal Maheshwari contributed to the literature review

and theoretical synthesis. Sunitha Prabhuram contributed to the cross-industry analysis and critically reviewed the manuscript.

#### AI Assistance Disclosure

AI-assisted academic discovery tools were used to support literature identification. All sources were independently verified, and all analysis, interpretation, and manuscript preparation were conducted solely by the authors.

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