

SUSTAINABLE HORIZONS: EXPLORING THE SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION BY EGYPTIAN FIRMS DURING THE POST-COVID ERA

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how firms embed sustainability in Egypt in their brand strategy as an example of a developing country. It also examines how these organisations communicated their sustainability practices on digital platforms, including websites and social media, during the post-Covid period. The study employed a qualitative research approach, conducting nineteen in-depth online interviews with brand managers of local Egyptian firms across various industries. The interviews were conducted online and were analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis indicated that the conceptualization of the notion of sustainability stems from how local brands do business. It showed that the concept of sustainability is still relatively new for local businesses. Furthermore, it showed that government policy and economic status can impact the extent of being a sustainable local brand. Finally, it showed that sustainability was intended, created, but not fully communicated by local brands during and after the pandemic. This study contributes to the marketing literature by examining how local brands communicate their sustainable business practices. Thus, it examines that emerging concept from the firms' perspective. Most of the existing literature focuses on the impact of sustainability on consumer behaviour. This study provides useful insights for managers and policymakers when promoting sustainable business practices in developing countries.

Keywords: Brand Communication; Marketing Communication; Sustainability; Covid-19; Brand Strategies; Social Media, Egypt; Marketing.

INTRODUCTION

At its core, doing business sustainably involves not harming the economy, environment, or society at large (Lee et al., 2024). Literature in marketing as early as the 1970's has indicated that marketing should emphasise preventing harm (Sweeney, 1972). Diallo et al. (2021) have established the strategic value of sustainable business practices, which not only improve long-term profitability but also serve as a tool for enhancing brand value. The literature has indicated that there is a lack of understanding of how firms in developing countries communicate about sustainability, which is considered a relatively new idea in these countries (Shahzamal & Hassan, 2019; Primožič & Kutnar, 2022). For instance, Wang et al. (2019) emphasised the urgent need to explore the implementation of sustainable business practices in developing nations, which confront a variety of cultural, social, and economic challenges in contrast to their more developed counterparts. Another important shortcoming in the extant literature is that the vast

majority of studies examined sustainable business practices from the consumer perspective, where they focused on the impact of these practices on consumer behaviour (e.g., Shao & Ünal, 2019; Servera-Francés et al., 2020). Thus, the present study attempts to address this gap by examining the adoption of sustainable business practices from the firms' perspective.

Embedding sustainability in marketing communication has become increasingly critical with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has presented new challenges to firms, particularly in the area of adopting sustainable business practices (Brydges et al., 2020; Ishrat et al., 2023). Specifically, in the post-pandemic period, a notable obstacle has arisen in aligning economic recovery demands with sustainability principles (Zhao et al., 2022). For instance, there has been a noticeable contradiction between the need for an immediate economic recovery and the commitment to long-term sustainability (Leal Filho et al., 2020). This contradiction is particularly evident in developing markets, where there is a clear focus on rapid economic recovery and job creation with less emphasis on the long-term adoption of sustainable practices (Othman et al., 2022; Yassin et al., 2022). One could argue that during economic downturns, there will be cuts to communication budgets, alterations in the regulatory environment, and a shift in consumer priorities as they seek cost-effective or budget-friendly product options (Nikbin et al., 2022), all of which will impact how brands implement and communicate sustainability as part of their strategy. However, it's increasingly imperative for businesses to effectively communicate their sustainable practices to both consumers and stakeholders. For instance, recent studies have shown that more consumers are becoming interested in purchasing healthy and environmentally friendly products (Zayed et al., 2022). Also, stakeholders, including consumers, governments, and international bodies, continue to expect firms to communicate their sustainability efforts in a transparent manner (Lee et al., 2024).

This study has some interrelated objectives. The first is to explore how local firms embed sustainability in their brand strategy. It further examines how they communicate about their sustainability practices online. Finally, it investigates the pandemic's impact on their communication of sustainable business practices Bansal & DesJardine (2014).

The importance of this research study lies in the fact that it addresses the company approach, which answers the need for different stakeholder approaches, as mentioned by Ishaq & Maria (2019). Indeed, previous work indicates that each company develops its own approach towards highlighting its sustainability strategies (Crittenden, 2005). Still, Stohl et al. (2007) argue that the framework should be standardised globally. Furthermore, prior studies focused primarily on global brands, resulting in a limited exploration of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by local brands (Nguyen et al., 2021). This means that while the current corporate environment places significant emphasis on sustainability, there is a noticeable absence of scholarly research, particularly in relation to the sustainability strategies adopted by scenarios such as local enterprises in developing nations. In this article, we argue that context has implications. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of extensive research on the correlation between marketing communication tactics utilised by local firms and their dedication to sustainability and the underlying motivations driving these messages, specifically in very particular contexts Dyllick & Muff (2016).

By examining the concept of sustainability from the firms' perspective, this study aims to fill a gap in the literature by offering empirical insights into the sustainability practices adopted by local firms. It contributes to our current knowledge base by providing a comprehensive analysis of the specific circumstances, obstacles, and potential advantages related to implementing sustainable practices in a developing nation. Furthermore, this study adds a

significant element to the ongoing academic discussion about the sincerity and impact of companies' efforts to be more environmentally friendly by providing a thorough analysis of the benefits and expectations associated with sustainability communication Ferrer-Estévez & Chalmeta (2023). Further to that, this study fills in previous gaps, which are a result of a lack of discussion on how brands in developing countries communicate about sustainability issues, specifically in the post-Covid era (Primožič & Kutnar, 2022).

When viewed from practitioners' perspectives, the research findings have significant implications. This study offers valuable insights into the complex sustainability practices of local firms, which managers and policymakers can apply to foster sustainable growth in the business sector.

This paper is structured as follows: Firstly, we provide a comprehensive literature review about the concept of sustainability, specifically emphasising its importance in the post-Covid period. The literature section then highlights the importance of communicating sustainability on digital platforms. A section follows, discussing the adopted methodology for data collection and analysis in this research study. The next section then discusses the findings. Finally, the discussion, contribution to theory and practice, the study's limitations, and directions for future research are introduced Ferrero-Ferrero et al., (2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability in developing countries

The concept of sustainability has become increasingly important in modern global corporate practices as a key transformation in how corporations worldwide approach their operational strategies (Góes et al., 2023). It focuses on integrating economic growth, social equity, and environmental practices within company operations (Mendes et al., 2023). This requires a shift from a profitable, near-sighted mindset to one that considers the broader implications for society and the environment while embracing a long-term perspective (Genç, 2017).

From an economic perspective, the adoption of sustainable practices necessitates a reevaluation of business models and strategies to foster the creation of products and services that are not only economically viable but also useful for society and the environment Nguyen & Mogaji (2022). This often involves the reduction of waste, the enhancement of resource efficiency, and the development of innovative processes and products, all of which lead to cost savings and the creation of new market prospects (Kantabutra & Ketprapakorn, 2020). Furthermore, there is a growing trend towards integrating sustainability ideas into corporate governance (Hussain et al., 2018). Organisations are increasingly recognising the need to adopt sustainable practices as a crucial factor in ensuring their long-term profitability, capitalising on emerging possibilities, and managing potential risks. Stakeholders are becoming more interested in companies' sustainable business practices, especially as concerns about environmental and social impacts grow (Ferrero et al., 2015). For instance, online platforms allow stakeholders to easily access information, which enhances transparency and communication about sustainable practices critical for retaining trust and loyalty. Investors look for companies that can show long-term viability through sustainable strategies, while consumers are increasingly aligning their purchasing habits with ethical and environmentally friendly brands. Engaging in transparent online communication about sustainability not only meets stakeholder expectations but also

improves a company's reputation and competitive advantage in the market (Tugrul & Gocer, 2017).

However, due to the socioeconomic challenges that developing countries face, the concept of corporate sustainability may have a different conceptualization and understanding compared to more developed countries Su et al., (2022). For instance, Possenti (2012) and Sharma (2019) assert that religious beliefs and the commitment to personal and cultural values drive the sustainable initiatives and CSR activities of companies in developing nations. They argued that the sustainability practices of local companies are totally different from those of multinational corporations, which adhere to stricter standards to achieve global status.

In developing countries, the concept of sustainability needs more exploration. Whereas the vast majority of studies focused on developed countries, in developing countries, the concept of sustainability is becoming an increasingly important topic, and many companies have begun to respect their policies, regulations, and codes of ethics, driven by the pressure they face from global partners and consumers (Tien et al., 2020). Previous research has indicated the positive implication of developing a competitive advantage through sustainability (Ishaq & Maria, 2019; Connell et al., 2012). Indeed, it was found that there is a correlation between environment and consumer behaviour (Connell et al. 2012). For instance, Zayed et al. (2022) argued that environmental concerns can enhance consumers' purchase intentions towards environmentally friendly products.

Despite these pressures, companies in developing countries are practicing sustainable practices in a philanthropic and voluntary style with the aim of enhancing their corporate and brand image and boosting their profitability, not necessarily for environmental benefits and social well-being (Nguyen et al., 2021). Addressing the several calls for understanding the concept of adopting sustainability by brands in developing countries (Wang et al., 2019), this paper examines that concept from the firms' perspective rather than the consumer perception. Also, this study focuses on local rather global brands.

The rising importance of sustainability in the Post-Covid Era

The post-COVID world has witnessed a change in market dynamics, with sustainability turning into a crucial factor in deciding investments and spending. This change is a result of both the realisation of the long-term financial advantages of sustainable practices as well as consumer preferences (Mattera et al., 2021). Furthermore, during the pandemic, deeply ingrained weaknesses in international labour markets and supply chains have been evident. Thus, businesses should take a more proactive approach to guaranteeing social justice, which covers fair labour standards, community assistance, and employee welfare. These procedures are essential for creating a dependable and devoted team as well as upholding a favourable company reputation (Sarker et al., 2021). In addition, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of organisations being adaptable and agile. Companies that had invested in sustainable practices and regional supply networks were better equipped to respond to the pandemic (Indarto et al., 2023). Thus, it is impossible to exaggerate the significance of sustainability in the post-COVID period. It is an approach that raises a business's competitiveness, resilience, and adaptability. Businesses can ensure their long-term prosperity in a constantly shifting global landscape while also making a positive, equitable, and sustainable impact on the world by incorporating sustainable practices into their core operations (Jlková, 2021).

The lockdowns have caused a decrease in human activity, but there have been some observable environmental improvements, like cleaner waters and less air pollution, which

highlighted the effects of industrial activity on the environment (Joshi & Kansil, 2023). Because of increased consumer demand for more environmentally friendly products as a result of this awareness, sustainable business practices are now essential to the survival and competitiveness of businesses (Gregurec et al., 2021). Indeed, a study revealed that consumers believe that COVID-19 has allowed the planet to recover (Khalil et al., 2021). Contrary to that, other studies found that some consumers still lack awareness of what sustainability really is (Strübel et al., 2023). This indicates a need for studying how brands conceptualise the notion of sustainability and how they go about communicating it. In addition, there is a scarcity of academic literature discussing the impact of the pandemic on corporate sustainability practices in developing countries (Su et al., 2022). Therefore, to address this gap in the literature, one of the objectives of our study is to examine how local brands have changed their views on sustainability after the pandemic.

Communicating business sustainability on digital platforms

In today's business environment, the significance of brand communication of sustainability, especially on digital channels like social media, has grown in importance (Tugrul & Gocer, 2017). In a time when information is easily available and consumer awareness is higher than ever, how brands convey their sustainability initiatives may have a big impact on their success, customer loyalty, and reputation (Bagdare, 2018).

Previous work indicates that consumers appreciate firms' sustainability efforts communicated on social media and that it has positive outcomes (Jha & Verma, 2023). In particular, social media gives businesses a dynamic platform to communicate with their audience, create a sense of community, and promote shared values, in addition to disseminating information about their sustainable practices (Brydges et al., 2022). Additionally, these media give brands a chance to show off their thought leadership in sustainability, which can enhance brand credibility and attractiveness, particularly among consumers who are passionate about sustainability issues (Nguyen & Mogaji, 2022). The difficulty in communicating sustainability, meanwhile, is avoiding "greenwashing," which is the practice of making exaggerated claims about a product's or service's environmental advantages (Lopes et al., 2023). Customers are growing more astute and dubious about these assertions (Brydges et al., 2022). As a result, communication must be genuine and honest. It is imperative for brands to guarantee that their communication is supported by concrete measures and aligned with their overarching sustainability plan (Gaber & Elsamadicy, 2020).

The requirement for relevance and personalisation in communication is another important factor. Brands must craft messages concerning sustainability to appeal to their target market, given the constant inundation of information consumers face. Brands are able to create interesting and timely messaging by having a thorough understanding of the values, interests, and issues of their target market (Kahle & Gurel-Atay, 2013). The marketing literature demonstrates that brand communication about sustainability, especially on digital platforms, significantly influences customer perception and behavior. It involves more than just spreading knowledge; it also involves involving, motivating, and establishing trust with customers (Dressler & Paunovic, 2021). Effective communication can enhance a brand's reputation, help it stand out in a crowded market, and demonstrate its genuine care for improving society and the environment (Shamsi et al., 2022).

Despite the previous discussions about the importance of brand communication for sustainability, there are some shortcomings in the literature that discuss how brands in

developing countries communicate sustainability, specifically in the post-Covid era (Primožič & Kutnar, 2022). Accordingly, our article study will fill this research gap by examining how brands communicate sustainability on digital platforms such as websites and social media.

METHODOLOGY

Our study focuses on brands in Egypt to explore how they conceptualize and communicate sustainability, especially post COVID-19 era. We chose to examine local brands as there is a scarcity in the literature that examines local brands, where most studies focused on global corporations that might be influenced by their global strategies when applying sustainability practices in developing nations (Sharma, 2019).

We adopted a qualitative research approach for the empirical study to gain insights into how Egyptian brand managers embed sustainability in their brand strategy and communicate it on digital platforms. Qualitative research has the advantage of being flexible as well as the ability to elicit in-depth insights from the participants (Legard et al., 2003). The adoption of a qualitative research approach provides a methodological contribution, where most of the research that examined sustainable brands in developing countries mainly depended on secondary data or quantitative data collection (e.g., Jestratijevic et al., 2022; Kong et al., 2021). The unit of analysis in this study is the brand manager (i.e. the interviewee) as the purpose is to collect insights on the conceptualisation and digital communication of brand sustainability in the post COVID-19 era.

In-depth interviews with brand managers of Egyptian brands, conducted online and recorded with the participants' consent, served as the primary data collection method. The researchers developed an interview guide that consisted of three sections. The first section contained questions that aimed to understand the concept of sustainability from the perspective of brand managers of local brands in Egypt. It aimed to explore how local firms embed sustainability in their brand strategy. The second section contained questions that aimed to explore the brand communication strategies of local brands on digital platforms and social media. The third section contained questions that aimed to explore how the pandemic changed the view of the brand managers towards sustainability concepts and how it impacted their sustainability communication during the post-Covid period. We utilized probing questions to delve deeper into the topic, specifically focusing on the integration of sustainability into brand strategy and its communication on digital platforms.

Purposive sampling was chosen to collect data (Marton, 2013). We conducted interviews with nineteen brand managers of local Egyptian brands from various industries. This diversity ensured a broad perspective on sustainability practices across different business sectors. Our study targeted individuals who hold significant roles in determining their brand's strategic direction, particularly in relation to sustainability. This included marketing managers with at least 5 years of experience. This sampling approach aimed to gather insights from those who are directly involved in shaping and implementing sustainability practices within their organizations. The firms were selected from different industries to allow for a broader perspective and insights to the novel notion. The current study examined the industries listed in Table 1. As shown, the respondents represented random different industries of local Egyptian brands. The researchers were both males and females. All respondents come from a professional background as the interest is to explore how the brands communicate sustainability during the post-Covid era. The research followed high socioeconomic tiers when it came to research approaches towards

sustainability as advised in literature in the case of studying sustainability (Etikan, 2016). The respondents inhibited greater Cairo since it's the Capital of Egypt that contains the headquarters of most Egyptian firms.

Interviewee Code	Gender	Industry	Years of Experience
R1	M	Pharmaceutical	17
R2	M	Software solutions	12
R3	M	Fashion	9
R4	M	Training	15
R5	F	Education	25
R6	M	Fintech	7
R7	M	Banking Sector	19
R8	F	Handicraft Industries	6
R9	F	Food and Beverage Distribution	13
R10	M	Heavy Manufacturing	8
R11	F	Pharmaceutical	21
R12	F	Banking Sector	24
R13	M	Fintech	6
R14	F	Hospitality	15
R15	F	Hospitality	9
R16	M	Education	24
R17	M	Heavy Manufacturing	23
R18	M	Hospitality	15
R19	M	Heavy Manufacturing	19

Piloting interviews with experts is a critical preparatory phase that lays the foundation for robust qualitative research. Piloting occurred on two levels in this study. First it included a systematic evaluation of interview questions to allow refining of the instrument, and addressing potential challenges. Statements that were considered to be redundant or confusing were removed. By doing so this research enhanced the relevance of the findings. For purposes of pre-testing the instrument, piloting was employed to ensure that the questions designed would reach the intended outcomes as specified by Turner III (2010). Second, this study underscores the importance of piloting practices in qualitative research and offers valuable insights through preliminary data piloting in the form of interview with experts. The three experts who interviewed and selected randomly from the field of corporate communication in Egypt.

Findings from piloting with experts indicates that in recent years, sustainability has emerged as a key consideration for businesses worldwide, including those operating in Egypt. As consumers become increasingly conscious of environmental and social issues, brands are under pressure to communicate their sustainability efforts effectively. However, the Egyptian market presents its own set of challenges and opportunities for sustainable brand communication, shaped by economic factors and political dynamics. Specifically, they implied the importance of research to identify the challenges and barriers faced by sustainable brands in effectively communicating their sustainability efforts in Egypt. Further to that it was concluded that through targeted efforts and strategic messaging, sustainable brands can make a meaningful impact on both the Egyptian market and the broader sustainability agenda

We conducted the interviews online using Zoom Software, taking into account the convenience and availability of the interviewees. We ensured that each session lasted approximately 30-45 minutes to thoroughly explore each topic. Before the start of each interview, participants were provided with a consent form outlining the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality and anonymity measures in place. This step was crucial to address ethical considerations, ensuring participants' informed consent and the protection of their privacy.

The data analysis involved transcribing the recorded interviews verbatim, coding the data and then conducting a thematic analysis. The data was transcribed manually. We adopted structural coding and only one cycle of coding was achieved due to saturation of ideas. As per Macqueen et al. (1998) structural coding uses a phrase to describe data that is related to a specific research question that was used in structuring the interviews. The strength between codes and research questions are also supported by Miles & Huberman (1994). Further to that the process entailed a meticulous review of the codes to identify recurring themes and patterns relating to sustainability conceptualization, communication strategies, and implementation challenges (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Thematic approach allowed for looking for patterns of meaning in a dataset to be able to address the research question as explained by (Clarke & Braun, 2017). It allows to unleash the themes salient in the text as indicated by Attride-Stirling (2001). Thematic analysis describes the data in rich detail and sometimes even goes beyond that as explained by Clarke & Braun (2017). Data analysis stopped when saturation was achieved, which is a common practice in qualitative studies (Baker & Edwards, 2012).

FINDINGS

This section outlines the findings of the thematic analysis as discussed in the methodology section for the interview transcripts.

THEME1

“The conceptualization of the notion of sustainability stems from how local brand do business.”

One of the outcomes of interviews surfaced around the notion of conceptualising the concept of sustainability. This resonates with our research objective that is set out to explore how the local brands formulate the idea of sustainability, hence its conceptualization. Sustainability was found to be conceptualized through several factors. These include the strategic direction of the brand, the brand vision, the relationship between sustainability and the brand, the forces behind adopting the notion, and its implications for customers. With regards to strategic

direction, local brands correlated their conceptualization of sustainability to elements such as the impact of the notion on providing competitive advantages. To emphasise sustainability, it was seen as a strategy to beat competition, as implied by one of the interviewees (as reflected in quote Q1R1). Also, it was found to be adopted as part of cutting costs and coping with international standards.

"Yes, value chain approach to beat competition. It's more of a competitive advantage to maintain and grow the market position." (Q1R1)

Furthermore, we found that the notion of sustainability inspires some business models. For instance, Q2R6 clearly demonstrates that the business draws inspiration from the social dimensions of sustainability. This is aside from other interviewees who have implied that the notion of sustainability was present in their strategic plans as a prominent direction of ethical and social responsibility due to being in highly pollutant industries (check Q3R3).

"Also, we have a business model that is based on the reuse and recycling of products." (Q2R6)

"Our business is highly polluting, so we must be ethical, save the environment, and watch out for our water consumption." (Q3R3)

On the other hand, the discussions showed that many of the participants think that sustainability is synonymous with the concept of corporate social responsibility, believing that they are the same thing. Some of them believe that they understand the concept and that it is related to philanthropy and donations, especially during holy months such as Ramadan in Egypt.

"I think that sustainability means the corporate social responsibility that corporations do in the month of Ramadan; we do a lot of donations in that month." (Q17R1)

"For me, sustainability is a concept that I hear about in the media. I think we do sustainability by providing donations to the poor. But really, we don't have a clear definition for that concept in our company." (Q16 R3)

With regards to the forces, it was found that the target customer inspires the brand, not the other way around. For example, some businesses were found to exist to allow consumers to be sustainable instead of being focused on other value-driven approaches. Indeed, these brands were found to be more social businesses. Even in instances where the business was found to not be a social business, the customer was found to be strongly correlated to the notion of doing business sustainably, as shown from the quotes below.

"Suitable commerce between consumers in the community is our vision." (Q4R6)

"Our primary goal is reliability and sustainability; we imagine a place for arts and creativity for everyone to let out their inner artists without being constrained by reality. " [sic](Q5R8)

"Negative, because when they find no strategy, they are questioning why we are not meeting global standards." (Q6R3)

"Positively related to customer satisfaction, we use this to promote our organisation to competitors." [sic] (Q7R4)

Also, another important force for sustainability that appeared in the discussions were the religious beliefs and the personal ethics of the participants. Some participants said they do sustainability in their business because they are derived from their religious views, where they thought that this concept is deeply rooted in their religion and is much related to good ethical conduct, as shown in the sentences below:

"We do sustainability since our religion, which is Islam, provides us with directions to donate and not harm the environment." (Q19R4)

“I think sustainability is much more related to the attitudes of the management towards the environment. I think we practice a lot of donations and good ethical practices because all of the employees in our company have good morals.” (Q11R4)

THEME2

“Government policy and economic status present challenges to local sustainable brands in Egypt.”

During the conversation about the conceptualization of sustainability among local brands in Egypt, some interviewees brought up the challenges they face. These challenges were found to be related to the formulation of the idea of sustainability by the brands, which is related to the research objective set out to explore how the brands conceptualise sustainability. To elaborate, while some business models aspired to become sustainable, the local rules and regulations impeded such a direction. Furthermore, some interviewees correlated the possibility of adopting a sustainable business strategy with their financial situation. Being local, they found they couldn't provide such direction. In support of the above discussion, other interviewees have correlated the notion with charitable events that address hunger and economic development, as provided below. This indicates that the barriers include a lack of strong government support, economic and financial constraints, and poverty being the number one priority.

“Many focus on charity or donations—anything related to donations, especially in Ramadan. But I heard that some banks start focusing on less paper.” (Q8R5)

In fact, some parts of the interviews revealed that if suitability is promoted locally, it's to cut costs and not to achieve the notion of continuity. Hence, it was correlated only to financial performance, implying that if you are not a financially well-performing brand, you would not adopt sustainability.

“Social responsibility exists in banks that can do it financially. I will donate because I have excess. We are in a financial crisis. I haven't seen any company do it, but I saw some banks. It's about saving costs and not sustainability.”

“(SIC) (Q9R7)

Further to that, interviewees attributed the novelty and lack of government support to the fact that sustainability is not yet fully embraced; perhaps there are other local priorities. To explain, as the interviewees shown below, it is found to be a novel thing locally, meaning it's still at its begging. In addition, the government was found to play an important role by enforcing and allowing a system that embraces sustainable directions.

“It's not well promoted in Egypt yet, but it's very important. The government needs to enforce that even for people.” (Q10R3)

“Regarding the restrictions faced by the government, we try to put the products back into the sustainability cycle or recycling process. But there are restrictions, so we are not able to do it locally. But still, our global partners continue, so we can say we contribute, but still with restrictions.” (Q11R2)

THEME 3

Sustainability is intended, created, but not fully communicated by local brands.

It is clear from the responses of the participants that they acknowledge the objective of communicating the notion of being a sustainable business. However, the actual promotion did not yield significant results. This could be correlated to some of the barriers, like low government enforcement and financial situations. The interviewees below R4 and R9 provide

confirmation of the importance of communication. The role of engaging the target audience and the specific role of social media were mentioned. Further to that, R9 mentioned that it is because their promoted products are sustainable that customers are attracted; in fact, word-of-mouth communication was also found important.

"Yes, through the website, encouraging the engagement of various colleges. We work highly on projects on emissions and sometimes posts on social media of students's activities on Facebook and Instagram." [sic] (Q11R4)

"Yes, our efforts are highlighted in what we do, and it's the main reason why our customers are willing to buy and pay more for the product, as by doing this they can contribute to the environment. We do so through social media and word of mouth." [sic] (Q12R9)

The effort with regards to communication was found not to be profound. To elaborate, the communication strategy surfaced mainly between the objective and social media or campaigns. There is no clear evidence over the use of websites or an integrated marketing communication campaign (reflected below in responses R5 and R3). In fact, one interviewee (R2 below) highlighted that their target audience might not find it interesting, and hence there is no clear evidence of promotion of sustainable efforts, despite company practices. Still, significant evidence of different roles in communication was found. For example, one interviewee highlighted contractual communication, face-to-face communication, and even the use of customer relationship management to support sustainability as a strategy (R1 below). On the other hand, some interviewees reflected no internal communication, as reflected below. Different industry standards could play a role in this variation.

"It's a minor communication because not all customers are interested." (Q13 R2)

"Nothing on our website." (Q14R5)

"Mainly in campaigns, not on websites." (Q15R3)

"Create a demand for the product; we partner with our suppliers; ensure consistent material to produce. Also, business or contractual communication creates demand through medical teams who communicate with doctors. It is all related to intensive market research, our CRM, and face-to-face communication." [sic] (Q16R1)

"No internal communication" (Q17R5)

THEME 4

The pandemic had an insignificant impact on sustainability practices by local brands and didn't have a significant impact on brand communication.

The analysis showed that the vast majority of the interviewees indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic didn't have a significant impact on their sustainability practices and that their communication about sustainability practices during and after the pandemic was not changed. This can be seen from the answers of interviewees R12, R14, R15, and R17.

"I think that sustainability practices by our company didn't change after the COVID-19 pandemic." (Q16R12)

"The pandemic didn't change our corporate communication about sustainability, since it is still a new concept." (Q16R14)

"I think that we depended on social media during the pandemic, and that was facilitated by the rapid digitalization in the country that followed COVID-19; however, I think that the sustainability content didn't increase in our posts." (Q16R17)

"I think that we should focus on more sustainability content on our website since our digital content lacks this form of content." (Q16R15)

As a conclusion, in this section, the four extracted themes were discussed as the main findings of this study, which is set out to explore sustainability among local brands in Egypt. Table 2 below demonstrates the correlations between the extracted themes and the objectives of the study. Also, it outlines the number of support quotes that provide rigor to the findings. In the next section, we provide the discussion and conclusion.

Research Objective	Extracted Theme in relation	Number of support quotes from interviewees
Objective 1 Explore how local firms embed sustainability in their brand strategy	“The conceptualization of the notion of sustainability stems from how local brand do business.”	Twenty Quotes
	“Government Policy and economic status can impact the extent of being a local sustainable brand in Egypt.”	
Objective 2 Investigating how local brands communicate sustainability.	“Sustainability is intended, created but not fully communicated by local brands”	Sixteen Quotes
Objective 3 Investigating the impact of the pandemic on the sustainability practices and its communication by these brands during the post-Covid period	“The pandemic had insignificant impact on sustainability practices by local brands and didn’t have a significant impact on brand communication”	Thirteen Quotes

DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTION

The research study in this article investigated how brand managers of local brands in Egypt adopted the concept of sustainability in the post-Covid era. This is considered important where it is expected that there would be a negative impact of the fast economic recovery that followed the pandemic on the environment (Barbier & Burgess, 2020). Another important contribution of this paper is that it examines the concept of sustainability from the firms’ perspective in a developing country like Egypt. The vast majority of studies that examined the concepts of sustainability focused on more developed countries (e.g., Kharazishvili et al., 2020). Also, the extant literature that was conducted in developing countries mainly focused on the impact of sustainable practices on consumer behaviour while largely neglecting how firms view and define sustainable business practices (Wang et al., 2019).

On the other hand, the nature of the sample of our study provides a contribution, as our study was conducted on local brands in a developing country. Previous studies have mainly focused on sustainability practices by global brands (Feng & Ngai, 2020). Thus, our study contributes to enhancing our understanding of sustainability practices by local brands, which are not guided by any global sustainability strategies.

Our findings showed that the concept of sustainability is considered a relatively new concept to local brand managers. Although most of the companies reported that they were aware of the concept, it was evident from the discussions that this concept needs more elaboration and

that much effort has to be made to promote the concept of sustainable business to local brands. An interesting insight that our findings showed is that many companies consider sustainability as a similar concept to CSR, whereas many of the participants didn't have a clear understanding of the concept of sustainability and its importance. Conversely, our research revealed that numerous brand managers of local brands attributed their sustainability practices to their religious beliefs and personal ethics. These findings are aligned with the work of Possenti (2012) and Sharma (2019), which showed that sustainability business practices in developing countries are mainly driven by personal initiatives and are not guided by any strategic directions.

There is no doubt that despite the lack of full government support for sustainable business during the COVID era, local Egyptian brands have endured to conceptualise the notion of sustainability. Yet, there is a gap between strategy and communication, as outlined over the next few paragraphs. About the conceptualization of the notion of sustainability among local brands in Egypt. This study has found a profound role for the government. Indeed, prior research has indicated a strong role for governments in supporting sustainable strategies. For example, it was found that government support has played a key role in this success in progress towards achieving sustainable development goals in the MENA region, as per Dhaoui (2022).

However, the research's findings reveal that Egypt's government has not made significant efforts to embrace sustainable ecosystems after COVID-19. Indeed, findings indicate that more government attention could help strengthen business practices on the topic. In support, Batisha (2022) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity, and the government should use it for a more sustainable future in Egypt. Still, the UN presents evidence that despite the 'woes' of the pandemic, the Egyptian government was among the few in the MENA region that scored growth (UN DESA, 2023). This gap implies that government efforts have not yet been fully reflected on the business scene amongst local brands during the pandemic.

Recommendations to the local government would include establishing regulatory measures for sustainability, providing economic incentives, and focusing on information and education. Regulatory measures could include mandatory controls and regulations over the use of energy. Economic incentives could include tax breaks as a reward for sustainable business. Finally, information and education would include raising awareness among the public and providing the right training and research for businesses in need of support concerning sustainable technologies, for instance.

This research shows how local brands need to focus more on the communication side of promoting how they embrace sustainability in doing their business in the post-COVID era. The findings highlight a discrepancy between the efforts made on sustainability and their effective communication. In particular, more attention needs to be invested in the role of the website in promoting local brand sustainability and business strategy. Websites are very important to outreach to stakeholders; they were found to be the promotional window, as implied by Fernández Vallejo (2023).

Furthermore, the findings of this study resonate with the theory of diffusion of innovation. The diffusion of innovation explains how new ideas spread in the market based on population segmentation (Rogers, 2003). Indeed, this study involves understanding how sustainable brands communicate this novelty with Egyptian consumers over time. Specifically, this study contributes to the role of segmentation in the diffusion of ideas (Szejda, 2021). Accordingly, it was found that there is no emphasis on the role of segmentation strategies of those who adopt sustainability. There was no evidence of categorisation of which segments of the Egyptian population are more likely to embrace sustainability and target your marketing

efforts accordingly. Furthermore, there was no evidence of a difference between early and late adopters. It was expected that early adopters would be sent more informational messages and later ones would receive more evidence and proof

Findings show a potentially strong role for local brands in promoting sustainability during the post-pandemic era, despite the economic constraints. This can be supported by previous work that shows how brands in less developed countries embrace sustainability and face opportunities as well as challenges (Singh & Abidi, 2021). Also, another edge for local brands is their special connection with local communities. When contrasted to global brands, this provides opportunities for a more sustainable context, especially after COVID, due to awareness of how local communities handled the pandemic.

Another interesting finding was about emerging ideas on how marketing strategies intersected with sustainability among local brands in Egypt. Customer relationship management has emerged as one of the approaches to how business in Egypt embraces sustainability in the post-COVID era. An interesting fact here would be that sustainable customer relationship management is based on sustainability communication, a rare finding in this study, as implied above. To elaborate, Ferrer & Chalmeta (2023) indicate that sustainability communication is one of the three core elements of sustainable customer relationship management. Their article refers to the approach by which a company promotes being sustainable to its public. Furthermore, interviews reflected on the word-of-mouth strategy to have a prominent role in local brands' success in sustainable business strategy. This is in line with previous work, which suggests that a business sustainability practice impacts word of mouth and loyalty (Karim & Rabiul, 2023).

Implications

This study makes significant scholarly contributions by delving into the complexities of sustainable strategies within Egyptian local brands. By evaluating how these brands think and interpret sustainability, the research provides valuable insights into the interpretation and application of this concept that is considered relatively new in that developing country. The findings inextricably link sustainability to strategic directions, brand ambitions, and consumer relationships. Businesses with large environmental footprints regard it not only as a competitive advantage but also as a pillar of ethical and social responsibility. Practically, this study provides useful insights for managers and policymakers trying to promote sustainable development in the business sector in Egypt. The findings highlight the significance of integrating sustainability with strategic business objectives, implying that sustainability may be a source of competitive advantage and social duty rather than just an added cost.

The study offers a new dimension to the sustainability debate by investigating the impact of government policy and economic status on the adoption of sustainable practices in Egypt. It emphasises the difficulties that local brands confront, such as financial limits, a lack of official backing, and the prioritisation of other pressing issues such as poverty. These findings contribute to a better understanding of the barriers to sustainability in poor countries, a topic that has received little attention in the literature. The study emphasises the importance of government policies and economic factors in aiding or impeding sustainability efforts. This highlights the importance of more supportive government frameworks and financial incentives for firms to adopt sustainable practices. Policymakers can use these findings to create policies that address the unique issues that local brands face when implementing sustainable strategies.

Furthermore, the study offers insight on local brands' communication tactics about their sustainability activities. The findings point to a disconnect between the goal and execution of sustainability communication, particularly on digital media. The research contributes to the understanding of the role of communication in sustainability, especially in developing economies, and the effective use of digital platforms for this objective. Furthermore, the study reveals a deficit in properly conveying sustainability activities, notably via digital media. This gives firms an opportunity to improve their digital communication strategy in order to better engage their audiences on sustainability issues. According to the findings, while there is a purpose to convey sustainability, the execution is frequently poor. As a result, organisations should engage in building strong digital communication strategies that effectively communicate their sustainability initiatives while also resonating with their target audience.

Overall, this study contributes to the academic discussion on sustainability by providing empirical evidence from a distinct geographical and economic setting. This study enhances comprehension of the integration of sustainability into business strategies and its communication to stakeholders, painting a complex image of the challenges and possibilities involved in advancing sustainable practices in developing nations.

Research limitations and directions of future research

Despite the contributions that this study provides, it is not without limitations that can provide some areas for investigation in future research studies. For instance, one notable limitation in our study is that is focused only on Egyptian local brands, which can hinder generalizability on other countries. Thus, future research can examine how firms communicate sustainability in other developing countries, which might provide a deeper understanding of sustainable business practices that might be influenced by cultural and economic factor. Another limitation of our study is that it used only one data collection method which is the in-depth interviews with brand managers of local firms. Despite that this method was extremely useful in understanding how local firms communicate about their sustainable business practices, future research can use other data collection tools such as content analysis of the social media pages of the brands. By doing so, future researchers can identify the content that is related to sustainability on these pages as well as other digital platforms. Future research should also look into customer attitudes and behaviours towards sustainability in developing countries. Understanding how customers in these markets perceive and respond to brand sustainability initiatives may be useful information for businesses looking to improve their sustainability communication and practices. Finally, because sustainability and digital communication are dynamic fields, ongoing research is required to stay current with changing trends, technology, and consumer attitudes. This would ensure that, in the face of changing global concerns, the concept of sustainability in corporate operations remains relevant and actionable.

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Received: 30-Sep-2025, Manuscript No. ASMJ-24-14890; **Editor assigned:** 03-Oct-2025, PreQC No. ASMJ-24-14890 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 18-Oct-2025, QC No. ASMJ-24-14890; **Revised:** 21-Oct-2025, Manuscript No. ASMJ-24-14890 (R); **Published:** 28-Oct-2025