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# 15 Aligning Green Marketing Strategies with the UN Sustainable Development Goals: A Framework for Corporate Practice

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**Abstract**

Green marketing has moved from an auxiliary tool of corporate social responsibility (CSR) to a strategy that has the potential to help achieve the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs). This paper reviews conceptual and empirical studies from the literature to show how the green marketing mix elements, namely green product, pricing, distribution, and promotion, can be effectively integrated towards the achievement of prioritized SDGs such as SDG 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, and 17 [1, 5, 9, 18]. Based on insights on greenwashing, consumer green purchase behavior, and industry sustainability communication practices, the paper highlights a gap between the rhetoric of SDG commitment and actual corporate practice [10, 12, 17]. The paper then suggests a five-step corporate approach involving materiality mapping, redesigning the marketing mix, effective communication, partnering with stakeholders, and measuring impact, which aims at aligning companies with the SDGs without falling into greenwashing traps. The paper concludes that competitive advantage from green marketing depends not on the amount of sustainability talk but on credibility, verifiability, and inclusion of stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Green Marketing, Sustainable Development Goals, Greenwashing, Green Marketing Mix, Corporate Sustainability, SDG 12, Stakeholder Engagement, Sustainability Communication.

## Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, encompassing seventeen sustainable development goals, has become an increasingly common framework of reference for corporate strategy planning, far transcending the original policy formulation arena into marketing [4,7]. Green marketing, broadly defined as any organizational efforts aimed at conducting exchanges to satisfy human needs in an environmentally friendly manner, provides business organizations with a natural channel through which sustainable development goals are implemented in consumer interactions [18,27]. Business organizations using green marketing techniques can integrate corporate goals with those of society, thus gaining competitive advantage in increasingly ecologically oriented markets while making a direct contribution to sustainable development targets set at a global level [1,3].

However, the link between green marketing practice and SDG contribution is not automatic and assured. There is increasing literature on the practice of greenwashing, where sustainability claims are exaggerated, selectively revealed or symbolically demonstrated without the corresponding organizational changes, thus, violating SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). This paper seeks to answer the ensuing strategic question: What should corporate marketing practices do in designing, communicating and validating their green marketing practices such that it contributes substantially to the SDG agenda instead of simply referring to it? The paper begins with a review of the theoretical underpinnings of green marketing, its mapping with SDGs, the greenwashing risk that jeopardizes such mapping, and ends with the proposed five-step corporate framework.

## Conceptual Foundations of Green Marketing

Polonsky is credited with offering a systematic definition of green marketing as all activities involved in creating and facilitating exchange relationships that would ensure satisfaction of human needs and wants with the minimum harm done to the natural environment [18,27]. Similarly, Pride and Ferrell have defined green marketing as the efforts undertaken by firms to design, market, price and distribute products in a way that would cause no damage to the environment [19]. The above definitions paved the way for the conceptualisation of green marketing as a marketing orientation that extends beyond promotion into all aspects of the marketing mix [20,24].

The literature has since redefined the classic elements of the marketing mix: product, price, place, and promotion as their 'green' counterparts [21,26]. Green product management includes environmentally responsible product design, low material intensity, and the ability to recycle after use; green pricing is aware of the extra costs incurred when manufacturing environmentally superior products that should be communicated to consumers as such; green place management stresses the importance of reverse logistics, ecological packaging, and localization; finally, green promotion is concerned with communicating environmental effectiveness in an honest and reliable way [22,23,25]. It is through this reformulated marketing mix that the structural bridge is achieved for pursuing SDG alignment in all aspects of corporate marketing decision making.

## Mapping the Green Marketing Mix onto the SDGs

While green marketing may potentially overlap with any of the seventeen SDGs in theory, however, the literature review has revealed a convergence of six strategic SDGs in relation to corporate marketing operations: SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) [6,7,16]. Firms need not make a vain attempt to engage with all seventeen goals in the same breath, but rather focus on the strategically material SDGs for their particular industry and value chain, such that a logistics company should focus on SDG 9 and SDG 13, and a fashion retailer should focus on SDG 12 by reducing waste from the supply chain [16]. Figure 1 below is a relevance matrix derived from the literature review, where each of the elements of the green marketing mix is mapped to its strategically relevant SDGs.

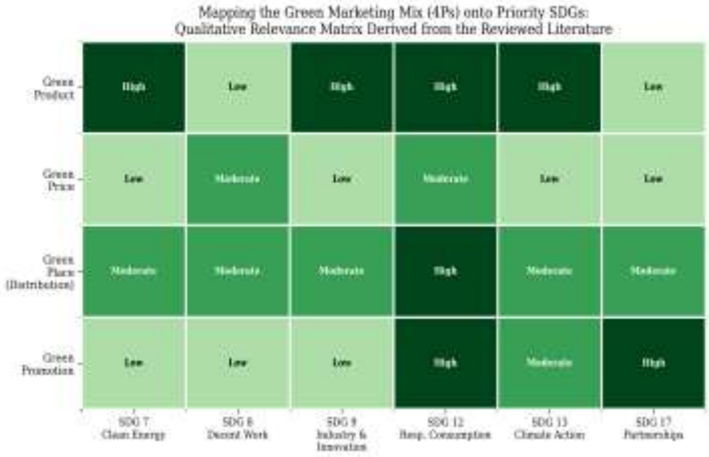


**Figure 1: Qualitative relevance matrix mapping the Green Marketing Mix (4Ps) onto priority SDGs, synthesised from the reviewed literature [1,6,7,16,18].**

Green product and place strategies are found to have more significance for SDGs 9 and 12 because eco-design and reverse logistics directly impact resource efficiency and technological advancement, while green promotion has more strategic importance for SDGs 12 and 17 because of its impact on consumer responsibility and inter-sectoral sustainability collaboration [6,14,16]. Green pricing is also considered as relevant to all goals, but to a smaller extent compared to other strategies, based on the literature which states that the mere price premium does not make any contributions to the SDGs without any confirmed practice behind it [14,18].

**Greenwashing as a Barrier to Genuine SDG Alignment**

Greenwashing, which involves exaggeration, selective disclosure, or even symbolic acts of environmental concern without undertaking corresponding actions, forms the main impediment to SDG-consistent green marketing efforts [10,12,17]. Greenwashing strategies in various sectors have been analyzed in a systematic review, and categorized into four types: Performance-Based Misrepresentation, Claim-Based Disclosures, Symbolic Strategies, and Impression Management; the study shows that greenwashing strategies vary systematically by industry sector, with manufacturing and energy companies adopting performance-based misrepresentation, while fast moving consumer goods and services tend to use more symbolic and impression management techniques [10]. Figure 2 shows this distribution by sector.

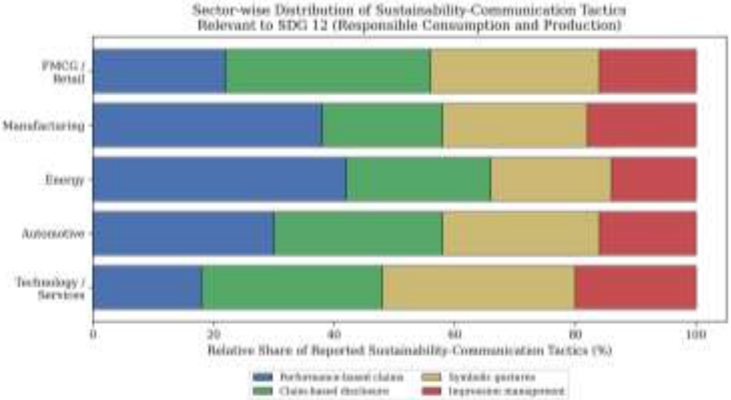


**Figure 2: Sector-wise distribution of sustainability-communication tactics relevant to SDG 12, synthesised from cross-sectoral greenwashing literature [10]**

Greenwashing directly threatens green trust, which is an important precursor of green purchase intention, and empirical evidence indicates that greenwashing reduces consumer trust in the credibility of environmentally friendly messages despite favourable perceptions of the behavioral control and subjective norms towards sustainable buying [11]. In this way, a growing 'gap between attitude and behavior' emerges, whereby consumers that express strong SDG values dismiss environmental marketing messages as unfounded due to lack of verifiability, thus impeding the differentiation intended through green marketing efforts [11,17]. Exaggeration of certification, selective disclosure, and vagueness in SDG commitments have been observed consistently in various industries, and hence hindered the achievement of SDG 12 [10].

**From Conventional to SDG-Aligned Practice: A Maturity Perspective**

The existing literature implies that the distinction between greenwashing practice and true green marketing practice, aligned with the SDGs, is less about the ambition of the goals set but more about the maturity level of six practices behind these goals: eco-design incorporation, open communication, stakeholder involvement, certification process, sustainable supply chain, and measuring impacts using key performance indicators [8,14,16]. Figure 3 shows the comparative maturity profile of two types of practices along six dimensions.

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**Figure 3: Comparative maturity profile of conventional versus SDG-aligned green marketing practice across six operational dimensions, synthesised from the reviewed literature [8,10,14,16]**

The analysis shows that the maturity gap is largest in areas of verified certification and impact measurement – the very attributes which are most able to differentiate genuine sustainability performance from mere symbolic discourse [10,17]. It further underlines the point that measurement and third-party verification systems need to be the focus of corporate green marketing systems, not communication itself, for SDGs to make any tangible difference [12,17].

### A Five-Stage Framework for Corporate Practice

Based on the above analysis, this paper presents a five-stage framework aimed at guiding corporate marketing functions towards true SDG alignment, as presented in Figure 4.

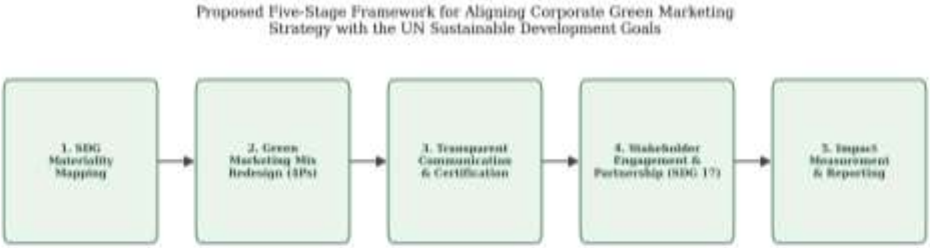


**Figure 4: Proposed five-stage framework for aligning corporate green marketing strategy with the UN Sustainable Development Goals**

| Stage | Core Activity | Illustrative Reference |
|---|---|---|
| SDG Materiality Mapping | Identify the two to three SDGs most material to the firm's sector, value chain, and stakeholder expectations, avoiding superficial engagement with all seventeen goals. | [16] |
| Marketing-Mix Redesign | Reformulate product, price, place and promotion decisions around eco-design, fair value pricing, reverse logistics, and evidence-based promotion. | [18,21,26] |
| Transparent Communication & Certification | Adopt third-party verified eco-labels and disclosure standards to counter greenwashing scepticism and rebuild consumer trust. | [10,17] |
| Stakeholder Engagement & Partnership | Engage suppliers, NGOs, regulators and consumers collaboratively, consistent with SDG 17's emphasis on multi-stakeholder partnership. | [7,25] |
| Impact Measurement & Reporting | Establish measurable KPIs linked to specific SDG indicators and integrate them into recurring sustainability reporting. | [8,14] |

Used effectively, this process can change green marketing from an occasional process of promotion to an integral strategic tool. Materiality mapping at the beginning of the process makes sure that the marketing mix will be redesigned only in areas where there is real value added for the environment and society, while verification and measurement processes later provide evidence for defending sustainability claims under increasing scrutiny [10,16,17].

## Discussion: Strategic Implications for Corporate Practice

Two important implications can be drawn from the above discussion. One, in an environment of increasing consumer skepticism towards unverifiable sustainability claims, competitive advantage from green marketing will depend increasingly on credibility over communication effort; firms that have invested in credible mechanisms for external verification and disclosure will be in a better position to translate their willingness to pay premium for sustainable products into action [14,17]. Two, SDG-based green marketing cannot be conducted in a vacuum, through marketing alone; given that SDG 12 and SDG 17 require supply chain engagement in particular, any effective implementation strategy must involve coordination among the marketing, operations, procurement and sustainability reporting functions [7,10]. Any firm that sees SDG alignment merely as a communications strategy will fail in its objective for the very reasons highlighted across the manufacturing, energy, FMCG and services sectors [10,12].

## Conclusion

Green marketing offers great strategic value towards the achievement of the SDGs, but this value is realized in situations where the implementation of the marketing strategy goes beyond the realm of communication of sustainability towards a measurable alignment of the whole marketing mix with sustainability [10,17,18]. The literature examined in this paper indicates that the crucial thing in this regard is not the level of ambition and frequency of communication regarding the SDGs by the company, but the credibility system underlying such communication in terms of third-party verification, transparency and key performance indicators [8,10,14].

The proposed five stages of green marketing, materiality mapping, marketing mix redesign, communication transparency, stakeholder partnerships, and impact measurement, provide corporate professionals with a roadmap for implementing SDG-aligned green marketing strategies while minimizing the risks associated with greenwashing practices that have plagued green marketing strategies [10,16,17]. These five stages address the specific issues where past failures have been encountered by companies. For instance, materiality mapping will help address the problem of firms trying to engage in all seventeen goals of SDG instead of engaging in the two or three SDGs that are most relevant to the value chains of firms [16]. Marketing mix redesign will address the issue of companies' failure to incorporate eco-design, fair pricing, reverse logistics, and evidence-based promotion in their marketing strategy as one comprehensive practice [18,21,26]. Communication transparency and certification practices address the issues that arise from performance-based, claim-based, symbolic, and impression management greenwashing practices [10]. Stakeholder partnership addresses the issue of how SDG 17 can be achieved through incorporation of suppliers, regulators, NGOs, and consumers into the sustainability processes [7,25]. Impact measurement is essential because it generates evidence about sustainability impacts that are demanded by consumers and regulators before trusting sustainability claims [11,14].

From the perspective of managers, the model has another crucial implication related to sequencing, namely, businesses that make attempts to have transparent communication or stakeholder engagement without having mapped the materiality and having redesigned their marketing mix face the danger of promoting unverifiable commitments, thus creating the very problem of greenwashing that the model tries to address. Competitive advantage through green marketing requires proper sequencing no less than good messaging [10,17].

This paper, however, is conceptual in nature, and although the suggested framework is based on synthesis of the reviewed empirical and theoretical literature, it has not yet been put to empirical testing. It is important to suggest future research directions. First of all, empirical research has to test the relationship between the suggested framework and brand equity along with verified SDGs' related performance. This study has to expand the list of sectors where it was tested beyond FMCG, manufacturing, energy, automotive and technology sectors [10,14]. Second, it is necessary to conduct longitudinal research to see if there are differences between the firms that implement the whole framework and those that use only one or two elements of it. These differences will be seen in lower greenwashing risk and higher consumer trust among companies that implement the whole framework. Finally, comparative research in both developed and emerging countries will shed more light on the impact of different regulations and disclosure practices.

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