Navigating Brand Purpose in the Post-Pandemic Era: Insights from Marketing Agencies on Supporting SDGs through Strategic Delineation and Execution

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Navigating Brand Purpose in the Post-Pandemic Era: Insights from Marketing Agencies on Supporting SDGs through Strategic Delineation and Execution

Purpose

This study investigates the role of marketing agencies in aligning brand purpose with the Sustainable Development Goals in the post-pandemic era. It explores whether and how marketing agencies delineate and execute brand purpose in a way that supports sustainable consumption and marketing models.

Design/methodology/approach

Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews with 35 senior managers at UK-based marketing agencies. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using NVivo software for inductive coding.

Findings

The study reveals that brand purpose in the post-pandemic era is increasingly aligned with the SDGs. Marketing agencies play a pivotal role in this alignment, as they not only help to delineate and execute the brand purpose, but also do so in a way that amplifies perceived authenticity in the eyes of the brand stakeholders.

Originality

This research underscores the significance of marketing agencies in delineating and executing brand purpose that aligns with the SDGs. It enriches the literature by illustrating how agency expertise contributes to the evolution of brand purpose, guiding businesses towards responsible marketing practices and consumption patterns that support a sustainable future.

1. Introduction

In an era where society grapples with pressing issues like unsustainable practices, overconsumption, poverty, climate change, discrimination, inequality, and repercussions from the Covid-19 pandemic (Dixit *et al.*, 2023), consumers are increasingly demanding socially responsible behaviour from brands that align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Sarkar and Kotler, 2020; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020; Deutsch and Mouton, 2022). This call for sustainable business practices spans across developed and developing economies, illustrating a global shift towards purpose-driven consumerism (Haller *et al.*, 2022). However, varying factors such as economic stability, cultural norms, and access to information may shape consumer priorities differently in developing economies (Wang *et al.*, 2019). Despite this growing expectation, the internal drivers motivating brands towards positive societal impact in line with the SDGs remain underexplored (Edelman, 2023; Hoppner and Vadakkepatt, 2019). Recent studies offer valuable insights into the ethical, strategic, and engagement factors influencing SDG adoption (Anastasiadou *et al.*, 2023; Santos and Silva Bastos, 2020). Nevertheless, questions linger about how brands can authentically project internal prosocial initiatives to external audiences (Schmidt *et al.*, 2021; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020), underlining the need for authenticity in both intention and execution.

In the post-pandemic era, the business and marketing landscape is changing, reflecting a profound transformation in societal expectations and challenges (Edelman, 2023; Euromonitor, 2024). A notable decline in economic optimism, coupled with institutional distrust, particularly towards government, elevates brands to a position of ethical leadership, compelling them to address critical societal issues such as climate change, inequality, and the economic divide. Within this intricate scenario, the challenge of financing SDGs in a post-pandemic world becomes even more daunting, especially for developing countries grappling with fiscal constraints and the pressing need to support livelihoods, health, and welfare, while also striving

towards sustainability goals (Arora and Sarker, 2022; Medina-Hernández *et al.*, 2023). This shift necessitates a more pronounced corporate responsibility, as brands are expected to lead collective efforts towards sustainable development goals and navigate an increasingly polarised societal landscape. The imperative for brands to balance taking stands on contentious issues with staying true to their brand ethos underlines a significant departure from pre-pandemic norms, establishing a redefined corporate role in directing society towards a more equitable and sustainable future.

Brand purpose, increasingly recognised for enhancing brand value and stakeholder relevance in the post-pandemic context (Calder, 2022; Schmidt *et al.*, 2021; Williams *et al.*, 2022), lacks extensive exploration of both its genesis and its broader impacts on new marketing models (Calder, 2022; Hajdas and Kłeczek, 2021; Mirzaei *et al.,* 2021; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, research scarcely addresses the determinants of its perceived authenticity in the context of SDG-oriented initiatives (Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Södergren, 2021; Nunes *et al.,* 2021). Echoing Swaminathan *et al.* (2020) and Schmidt *et al.* (2021), who call for insights into brand alignment with organisational values and social messages, and aligning with Hajdas and Kłeczek (2021), who advocate for qualitative stakeholder-focused studies within this scope, this research aims to enrich the understanding of brand purpose through the lens of SDG implementation.

This study investigates perspectives from a unique stakeholder group: senior managers in marketing agencies. With their diverse client experiences and insights into evolving consumer motivations toward sustainable practices (Keegan *et al.*, 2017), these professionals offer a valuable perspective on how brands conceptualise and implement brand purpose in support of the SDGs. Our study highlights the critical role of UK-based marketing agencies in enhancing brand purpose within the post-pandemic, sustainability-focused market, revealing how a collaborative approach between brands and agencies can deepen the integration of SDGs into

branding strategies. By advancing the understanding of brand purpose's multifaceted nature, and its fundamental role in stakeholder engagement, this research offers significant theoretical contributions and outlines actionable strategies for aligning brand meaning with the SDGs, thus driving meaningful societal change and post-pandemic recovery.

2. Literature review

Purpose is a major area of interest within organisational settings with numerous scholars contributing to its evolving definition. Dhanesh (2020) underlines its importance in organisational contexts, while van Ingen *et al.* (2021, p. 13) define it as "an organisation's reason for being characterised by significance, aspiration, direction, unification, and motivation", a definition that resonates with the ethos of the SDGs. The concept of brand purpose, though grounded in similar principles, varies depending on brand architecture and is now often seen through the lens of sustainability. For instance, Unilever's corporate purpose to "make sustainable living commonplace" is a clear nod towards the SDGs, with its brands like Ben & Jerry's, Dove, Knorr, and Lifebuoy carrying distinct yet related brand purposes. Similarly, companies like Patagonia (SDG 13 – Climate action), Brewgooder (SDG 6 – Clean water and sanitation) and Tony's Chocolonely (SDG 8 – Decent work and economic growth) demonstrate an alignment between corporate and brand purpose that embraces SDG principles (Patsiaouras, 2024).

2.1 Brand Purpose

Researchers have conceptualised brand purpose as a transformative force that transcends mere profitability, focusing on the broader impact on stakeholders and the community (Calder, 2022). Swaminathan *et al.* (2020, p. 31) underline the significance of purpose-driven branding in upholding social values and empowering consumers to support social causes. Similarly, Quinn and Thakor (2018) acknowledge the aspirational nature of purpose-driven brands in promoting

social change. Such brands are regarded as catalysts for societal transformation, a viewpoint further reinforced by Swaminathan *et al.* (2020, p. 16) and echoed by Hajdas and Kłeczek (2021), who note their focal role in promoting sustainable consumption patterns and enhancing societal welfare.

As stated by Williams *et al.* (2022, p. 703), "a brand's purpose is a long-term, central aim that is a predominant component of its identity, meaning structure and strategy, which leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world that transcends the brand's profits". The 'why' of a brand, as defined by Mirzaei *et al.* (2021, p. 187), is intrinsically connected to its culture and values, a sentiment that aligns with the ethos of SDGs where purpose, vision, and goals are interlinked. Calder (2022) posits that the influence of a brand's purpose on consumers is heightened when perceived as genuinely integral to the brand, rather than a mere marketing strategy. This effectiveness is rooted in the authenticity with which the brand engages in purposeful actions that resonate with its core mission. Furthermore, Veloutsou (2023) emphasises that the establishment of a brand's identity inherently includes the recognition and incorporation of its purpose. This purpose, envisioned as a long-term, overarching goal, extends the brand's contribution beyond profit to include societal value. Such principles of brand purpose are critical in guiding the development of the brand's identity, ensuring a coherent alignment between what the brand stands for and how it presents itself to the world.

Numerous concepts have been proposed within the literature, highlighting the importance of delineating how brand purpose differentiates from and enriches existing theoretical frameworks. Brand purpose serves as a strategic foundation, transcending beyond mere functional and symbolic benefits to define a brand's reason for existence, and consequently guiding organisational strategy (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2021; Williams *et al.*, 2022). Unlike CSR, which operates as a tactical display of social intentions (Pankiw *et al.*, 2020), or sustainable branding that focuses on environmental stewardship (Soler *et al.*, 2015), brand purpose integrates into

every facet of a brand's identity, driving strategic decisions. Finally, brand activism, though value-driven, is distinct in its focus on influencing sociopolitical discourse without necessitating a tie to the overarching brand purpose (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020).

The intersection of brand purpose with sociopolitical issues, particularly relevant to the SDGs' agenda, has become more pronounced, with brands expected to embody their values (Schmidt *et al.*, 2021; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020), reflecting a broader awareness of social dimensions in consumption patterns (Tucker *et al.*, 2018). Brands are more frequently demonstrating their sociopolitical affiliations, which often align with SDG goals (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020). Yet, this evolving landscape presents challenges, as noted by Sarkar and Kotler (2018), who stress the importance of authenticity in purpose-driven branding. On the same note, Mirzaei *et al.* (2021) and Vredenburg *et al.* (2020) highlight potential consumer scepticism towards inauthentic stances. Consumers "might even perceive purposeful firms more negatively than firms with no prosocial programs if those firms are behaving inauthentically" (Williams *et al.*, 2022, p. 715). There is a prevailing concern that commercial brands' attempts to superficially adopt SDG-related purposes may be primarily profit-driven, risking adverse consumer reactions, including boycotts, if perceived as inauthentic (Dalakas *et al.*, 2022).

2.2 The significance of authenticity

Authenticity has sparked significant discussion across various fields such as philosophy (Sartre, 1943), sociology (Carroll and Wheaton, 2009), anthropology (Handler, 1986), and psychology (Deci and Ryan, 2000), each investigating its multifaceted nature. Its exploration in marketing highlights its focal role in brand management (Fritz *et al.*, 2017), highlighting how brand authenticity is crucial in enhancing perceived quality and strengthening the consumer-brand connection. This includes enhancing trust, loyalty, and influencing both behavioural intentions and the potential for a brand to become culturally iconic. Such aspects are critical to the success

of SDG-oriented marketing strategies (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Nunes *et al.*, 2021; Södergren, 2021).

A distinction needs to be made between brands that genuinely embody a brand purpose which leads to authentic actions and those that superficially endorse one, especially in a world aiming to recover sustainably from the pandemic (Iglesias and Ind, 2020; Ind and Payton, 2021). In the case of the latter, this can lead to greenwashing, where companies suggest environmental commitments that are more cosmetic than substantive. Such inauthentic brand purposes are fuelled by a desire to enhance reputation rather than enact real change (Marquis *et al., 2016*). In these instances, societal pressure, from varied stakeholders such as government, media, and consumers, may influence purposeful corporate stances. Yet, these stakeholders are also capable of identifying and rejecting insincerity in brand purposes (Lyon and Montgomery, 2013).

Within brand management, authenticity is dissected into attributes such as continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism (Morhart *et al.*, 2015). Beverland and Farrelly (2010) propose similar attributes, including stability, originality, reliability, and genuineness in actions towards sustainable practices. Furthermore, Napoli *et al.* (2014) and Nunes *et al.* (2021) identified aspects such as accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency. These attributes suggest that consumers view authenticity as intertwined with truthfulness to self and the coherence of actions, a sentiment increasingly aligned with SDG commitments (Fouladi *et al.*, 2021). Södergren (2021) conceptualises authenticity as the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true to itself and its consumers. When brands overstate their communicative aspects, neglecting the essence, they risk being perceived as inauthentic (Hussain *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, brands that show an integrated approach in their non-market and business strategies are likely to be seen as authentic, fostering trust and

differentiation (Schallehn *et al.*, 2014). Reflecting on this dynamic, Han (2018, p. 20) suitably notes, "authenticity is a selling point".

2.3 Research Questions

Drawing upon the nuanced understanding of brand purpose and its critical role in contemporary branding strategies, particularly in light of the SDGs and the complex challenges of the post-pandemic landscape, our research seeks to explore the dimensions of brand purpose through the lens of marketing agencies. Given the increasing emphasis on sustainability and social responsibility, coupled with the heightened scrutiny of perceived authenticity, our study is directed by two focal research questions:

RQ1. How is brand purpose perceived by marketing agencies in the context of SDG implementation, post-pandemic?

RQ2. How can marketing agencies assist brands in delineating and executing a purpose that aligns with SDGs and is considered authentic by stakeholders?

3. Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of theories on brand purpose, this study opted for a qualitative research approach as the most suitable methodological framework (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative methods offer rich insights, allowing for a deeper comprehension of the subject matter at hand, particularly when theories in the field are still in development stages (Lowe, 2001). As highlighted by Rietjens (2015), qualitative research extends beyond mere description (the 'what') to explore the dynamics (the 'how') and underlying reasons (the 'why') of a given phenomenon. Our study leverages insights from semi-structured interviews with 35 senior marketing agency managers in the UK, chosen for their extensive advisory experience across FMCG and B2B sectors. Their unique intermediary role, serving a diverse clientele from SMEs to multinational brands, equips them with a deep strategic understanding of brand purpose

alignment with SDGs in the post-pandemic era. The purposive selection of information-rich participants (Malterud *et al.,* 2016) enriches our research with valuable perspectives on the strategic nuances of executing purpose-driven initiatives in various market dynamics.

Participants were identified using the Campaign Live database of UK Agency Managers, supplemented by our academic and professional networks. Out of an initial pool of 170 agency managers contacted, 35 consented to participate. To ensure adherence to research ethics, all participants signed an informed consent form prior to their interviews. This process highlighted the voluntary nature of their participation, the anonymisation of data, and the confidential handling of their responses. Moreover, interviews were conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines, ensuring a respectful and secure environment for participants to share their insights. The design and thematic underpinning of the interview questions were informed by an extensive review of the current literature on brand purpose and were strategically tailored to probe the integration of brand purpose with the SDGs in the evolving post-pandemic context. The interviews, each lasting between 45 minutes to one hour, were conducted via Microsoft Teams across a span of three months. The decision on sample size was led by the principle of data saturation, ensuring the depth and comprehensiveness of the collected data (Fusch and Ness 2015; Malterud *et al.,* 2016).

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed inductively using NVivo software (Iphofen and Tolich, 2018). Our thematic analysis began with a thorough reading of transcripts to identify key concepts and patterns. This process evolved into categorising these patterns into meaningful codes, sub-themes and themes, correlating them with the broader literature (Rietjens, 2015; Braun and Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis process conformed to established steps: familiarising with the data; generating initial codes; searching for, reviewing, and defining themes; and finally, producing a structured report (Levac *et al.*, 2010). We minimised potential interpretive biases by involving multiple researchers in the coding and

interpretation process and by validating findings with the interviewees in subsequent sessions (Iphofen and Tolich, 2018; Rietjens, 2015). The resultant themes were analysed and discussed in relation to existing scholarly work. This comparative and integrative approach led to uncovering valuable insights on how marketing agencies align brand purposes with SDGs amplifying its perceived authenticity in the eyes of the brand stakeholders.

4. Results

Marketing agencies often conflate purpose, social purpose and brand purpose and use the terms interchangeably - and they argue that industry practitioners do the same with purpose and social purpose. This semantic fluidity reflects an evolving landscape where the understanding of brand purpose and its relationship with sustainability lacks clarity, such that, "purpose in some ways, from a business perspective, has been slightly merged with social purpose" (Participant 31). Even if marketing agencies are inconsistent in their understanding and use of terminology, they tend to link brand purpose primarily to social and environmental ambitions, while understanding it must simultaneously deliver commercial benefits.

Significantly, marketing agencies are increasingly recognised as pivotal in shaping and projecting brand purpose. Participant 27's statement encapsulates this trend: "I have seen a huge increase in the amount of people talking about social purpose, a huge increase in the marketing press. [There are] new agencies set up which are there to create purpose for brands". Moreover, the role of agencies in not only crafting but also articulating purpose is underscored by Participant 2, who notes, "parts of the process [of advising clients] is bringing that sense of purpose together and clearly articulating it." The ascension of purpose as a cornerstone of brand identity and strategy, particularly in the post-pandemic landscape, is unambiguous. Participant 17's remark, "purpose is massively increasing in importance since COVID" aligns with Participant 19's viewpoint, delineating purpose as a fundamental element of modern business philosophy: "it's the next wave in terms of being purpose-driven". This trajectory suggests a

central strategic role for purpose in building meaningful and impactful brands that support the SDGs. Marketing agencies believe they can help connect brands to specific and relevant SDGs, communicate their commitment authentically, and balance purpose and brand attributes.

This conversation about brand purpose inevitably elevates discussions centred on the critical importance of authenticity. The sentiments of Participant 31 ("brand purpose can be really important as long as it's genuine") and Participant 23 ("Unilever is driven very much by bringing people benefits") highlight the importance of enacting purpose-driven initiatives. The value of authenticity is both internal and external. Internally, authenticity matters, because it has the potential to engage employees, guide decision making and ensure that commitments made are sustainable over time, while externally it matters because it helps to ensure that stakeholders can trust the claims of the brand. Participant 14's insistence that a brand must "live and breathe that purpose" encapsulates this ethos. Participant 5's assertion, "it's vital to be authentic", is complemented by Participant 25's practical perspective, emphasising "the congruence between stated purposes and organisational behaviour and policy", particularly in the context of broader social movements. Marketing agencies, therefore, play a pivotal role in ensuring this congruence by advising on policies, actions, and messaging that consistently reinforce the brand's purpose across all stakeholder interactions. They assess stakeholder expectations and advise on aligning internal and external practices with the brand's stated purpose to shape a more authentic stakeholder experience.

This nuanced understanding of purpose, as articulated by industry professionals, underscores a shift in branding philosophy in an era marked by heightened social consciousness and an emphasis on genuine engagement. These insights crystallise around a central theme: for a brand purpose to resonate authentically with stakeholders, it must transcend communications and be ingrained into every aspect of a brand's operations. In this schema, marketing agencies emerge as critical allies in the journey from conceptualising to executing a brand's purpose in a way

that is aligned with the post-pandemic market's expectations for sustainability and social impact. They achieve this by helping clients develop strategies that clearly delineate their purpose and enact it through consistent messaging, impactful actions, and alignment with broader social objectives. Such guidance ensures that a brand's raison d'être and strategic direction are in harmony with its social impact goals, ultimately building a more authentic brand narrative Table1.

Insert Table I here

4.1 Unravelling the 'Why': Insights into Brand Purpose

In exploring the fundamental essence of brand purpose, a theme repeatedly highlighted by marketing agency participants was the notion that brand purpose transcends financial motivations, offering a deeper connection with stakeholders that aligns with the ethos of the SDGs. Participant 7 eloquently captured this sentiment, stating, "it is important that people are driven by purpose ... people like to feel that they're doing something that has a purpose beyond making a few quid". This sentiment is particularly resonant in a post-pandemic landscape where businesses are expected to justify their existence through contributions to societal and environmental well-being.

The conversation around brand purpose consistently emphasised its role in defining the 'why' behind a brand's existence and its distinction in a competitive, often oversaturated market. Participant 28 asserted the centrality of purpose, "without a purpose, that business has no reasoning, no justification for its existence, and no incentive". As a result, marketing agencies are pivotal in facilitating a deep understanding among their clients about how to authentically integrate and communicate their purpose, making it resonate with stakeholders' values and expectations. Participant 1 added that brand purpose "provides meaning, and meaning enables purpose-driven brands to achieve differentiation in a saturated market". Brands can differentiate

themselves by aligning brand purpose with specific SDGs, particularly those emphasising responsible consumption and production, thus ensuring that their actions and communications are perceived as authentic and are directly tied to SDG outcomes.

4.2 Navigating Strategy: The Guiding Influence of Brand Purpose

The narrative on brand purpose also extended into strategic realms. As stated by Participant 20, "It's important, [brand purpose] because it's the difference between performance of tactical work that serves the interest of the brand and then something long-term, strategic, that benefits the world". In the post-pandemic landscape, this strategic direction, deeply rooted in the brand purpose, provides a compass, particularly in times of uncertainty, that helps businesses navigate challenging environments with clarity and confidence. As Participant 24 stated, "I think knowing what you are and what you want to be is absolutely important". This view was echoed by Participant 7 who stated, "What's our goal? What are we trying to achieve? If you have no goal, if you have no destination, then you're just wandering aimlessly in the wilderness".

Marketing agencies actively guide brands in elucidating their purpose to ensure it aligns with stakeholder expectations and broader societal values, thus clarifying brand meaning and facilitating decision-making. As Participant 31 stated, "we do think a purpose at the top level of why you exist is really important because it gives clarity to the business, the people working at it, and the key consumers". This strategic clarity was seen to foster authentic engagement with both internal and external stakeholders. The consensus among marketing agencies was that an authentic brand purpose, when employed as a decision-making tool, particularly in situations requiring trade-offs, enhances both efficiency and effectiveness, ensuring that every strategic decision consistently reflects the brand's fundamental *raison d'être*.

4.3 Catalyst for Change: Social Impact Powered by Brand Purpose

There was a belief that brand purpose should enable brands to have a positive social impact on society. For instance, participant 2 said, "Purpose is just another version of that clarity, but done in a way where the purpose is not to maximise profits. The purpose is to maximise impact". Participant 28 noted "that a company's impact is a follow-through of its purpose", with purposeful actions enabling a business to find its niche for maximal societal contribution. Marketing agencies actively facilitate this process by collaborating closely with their clients to delineate purpose in a way that maximises its societal impact while aligning with the SDGs. They referenced specific examples like Brewgooder, described by Participant 1 as "a beer whose profits go to help supply purified water" (SDG 6 - Clean Water and Sanitation) and Tony's Chocolonely, which Participant 20 noted is "there to end child slavery" (SDG 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth).

There was a sense in the interviews that purpose-driven brands can go a step further than "doing no harm", and they do so by caring for people. Purpose-driven brands demonstrate this sense of caring by "behaving well" (Participant 8) and by putting the right "kind of policies, procedures and approaches in place to protect people" (Participant 15). Marketing agencies advocate for these practices by ensuring that brand purpose translates into concrete, empathetic strategies and policies. Distinctly, Participant 31 observed, "there's just an awareness of the impact, and then there are the brands that are acting on doing something about it." A recurrent theme in the interviews was that brands driven by purpose genuinely care about having a positive social impact. These views surfaced mainly in relation to the sense of empathy, rather than duty. Specifically, there were some suggestions that purpose-driven brands want to have a positive impact on people, the environment and local communities as they feel part of an ecosystem. As Participant 18 stated, "probably the most important thing would be empathy," highlighting the awareness of existing "within an ecosystem" and the importance of prioritising empathetic and long-term decisions, resonating with the ethos of the SDGs.

In conclusion, the evidence collated from participants indicates a clear trajectory where the brand purpose is not just a cosmetic tool but a fundamental pillar of post-pandemic brand identity. From guiding strategic decisions to driving social change, brand purpose emerges as a pivotal element that shapes not only how brands are perceived but also how they operate within the broader societal and business landscape. In the post-pandemic context, marketing agencies, recognising these multifaceted implications, play a crucial role in delineating and executing a dynamic and integrative brand purpose that lends depth to their clients' narratives and actions. They ultimately strive to bridge the gap between a brand's declared purpose and its stakeholders' perceived authenticity, creating sustainable and authentic social impact.

5. Discussion

Reflecting on the pivotal role of brand purpose in enhancing firms' societal impact and customer engagement, recent studies highlight its potential to drive social change, particularly in the context of the implementation of the SDGs (Hajdas and Kłeczek, 2021; Mirzaei *et al.,* 2021). However, brand purpose is not well delineated, there is a lack of clarity as to its execution and actions are not always perceived as authentic (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2021; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2022). This study sheds light on the role of brand purpose, through the mediation of marketing agencies, who in dialogue with their clients, and in the development of communications and supporting actions, help to shape its meaning in an authentic way (RQ1 and RQ2).

Our research shows that marketing agencies underscore the view that brand purpose answers the fundamental 'why' behind a brand's existence and to provide clarity to stakeholders (Sarkar and Kotler, 2020; Schmidt *et al.*, 2021). This finding resonates with the literature that describes brand purpose as a crucial element that enhances stakeholder engagement by transcending profit motivations, demonstrating how marketing agencies are pivotal in transforming unstructured

organisational aspirations into strategic actions aimed at societal betterment (Calder, 2022; Mirzaei *et al.*, 2021). Our findings reinforce the notion shared by Veloutsou (2023) that a brand's identity, including its purpose, should not only aim for profit but may also encapsulate societal meaning, reaffirming the brand's role as a catalyst for societal transformation.

The study underscores that in the context of a post-pandemic market, it is imperative for marketing agencies to cultivate the perceived authenticity of a brand's purpose. This involves taking a consistent and genuine stance on social issues and ensuring alignment between brand messaging and actions - a significant consideration in the pursuit of the ambition of the SDGs (Moulard *et al.*, 2021; Nunes *et al.*, 2021; Schallehn *et al.*, 2014). Agencies believe that brand purpose not only simplifies strategic decision-making but also fosters social impact, further enhancing its perceived authenticity in stakeholders' eyes (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). This emphasis on authenticity and social impact echoes Swaminathan *et al.* (2020) and Williams *et al.* (2022), who highlight the importance of purpose-driven branding in promoting social values and empowering consumers.

Contrary to some earlier beliefs that perceived authenticity is non-commercial, this study finds that brands can successfully marry profit with purpose (Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2014), when they authentically commit to realising their stated purpose (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Södergren, 2021; Nunes et al., 2021; Moulard *et al.*, 2021). Marketing agencies assist brands in achieving this balance by advising them on integrating purpose into their business models and highlighting their societal contributions in ways that strengthen brand equity. This alignment of authenticity with profit and purpose strengthens the argument by Williams *et al.* (2022) and Mirzaei *et al.* (2021) on the intrinsic connection between a brand's 'why', its culture, values, and societal contributions.

In conclusion, marketing agencies emphasise that to be authentic, purpose-driven brands must consistently invest in their purpose and demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the social issues they address (Sarkar and Kotler, 2020; Schmidt *et al.*, 2021; Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020). Superficial or culturally insensitive actions risk scepticism, whereas authenticity stems from a harmonious alignment between words and actions over time (Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). By strategically advising on brand messaging, stakeholder engagement, and business practices, marketing agencies can help clients translate their purpose into consistent actions that align with sustainable and responsible business goals.

6. Theoretical implications

This study provides an enhanced understanding of the elusive and under-researched construct of brand purpose within the framework of the SDGs. By employing qualitative methods and harnessing insights from a knowledgeable yet frequently overlooked group – senior managers in marketing agencies – our research augments the brand management literature in several distinct ways. Firstly, we offer an incremental theoretical contribution as defined by Nicholson *et al.* (2018, p. 208), who characterise it as an approach based on "identifying gaps through a traditional review of literature". Our investigation centres on brand purpose and sheds light on its implementation and significance. The insights provided by marketing agency professionals, who are often involved in the formulation of branding strategies (Keegan *et al.*, 2017), enrich the conceptualisation of brand purpose, revealing its role in how brands engage with sustainable business practices. Marketing agencies, by understanding the needs and expectations of stakeholders, influence the delineation of brand purpose to align with the SDGs while ensuring it resonates authentically with both internal and external audiences.

The study emphasises the dialogic way brand purpose is developed and the importance of a collaborative framework (Calder, 2022; Díaz-Méndez and Saren, 2019; Iglesias and Ind, 2020).

In this way, agencies can contribute significantly to both the refinement and the execution of brand purpose. This collaborative approach suggests a deeper, more integrative role for marketing agencies in aligning brands with the SDGs. As a result, the strategic input of marketing agencies emerges as a crucial factor in shaping both the internal and external meaning of brands (Veloutsou, 2023), their strategies, and their broader scope (Calderwood *et al.*, 2021; Díaz-Méndez and Saren, 2019). These findings resonate with and build upon prior research (Hajdas and Kłeczek 2021; Mirzaei *et al.*, 2021), adding depth through the lens of this underexplored stakeholder group in the post-pandemic context.

In line with MacInnis' description (2011, pp. 144, 145), we expand the understanding of brand purpose by detailing, describing, and charting its various facets. Our findings illustrate that brand purpose serves as a key to unlocking the 'why' behind a brand for external stakeholders, providing strategic direction and acting as a driving force for transformative change. Notably, such facets have not been fully explored in the existing literature concerning brand purpose (Hajdas and Kłeczek 2021; Mirzaei *et al.,* 2021; Williams *et al.*, 2022), marking a significant theoretical advancement. Lastly, we extend the theoretical discourse through the concept of integration as described by MacInnis (2011, p. 146). Our work bridges the gap between brand purpose and its perceived authenticity, unveiling how the former can be authentically perceived by the brand stakeholders. Marketing agencies play a pivotal role in this integration process, helping shape brand purpose and craft authentic brand narratives. This integration is essential in enhancing the perception of authentic brand purpose (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Morhart *et al.*, 2015; Moulard *et al.*, 2021; Napoli *et al.*, 2014). In agreement with Vredenburg *et al.* (2020) and Schmidt *et al.* (2021), we posit that perceived authenticity is not only crucial for conventional brands but also imperative for those driven by purpose, underlining the role of marketing agencies in enhancing its perceived authenticity within the framework of sustainable and responsible marketing.

7. Managerial implications

Our findings illuminate a crucial aspect of contemporary brand management within the context of the SDGs in the post-pandemic landscape: while many brands already have an inherent purpose, there is often a gap in fully aligning it with the principles of the SDGs and the post-pandemic recovery. The post-pandemic era has heightened the importance of aligning branding strategies with the SDGs, as consumers increasingly seek to engage with brands that demonstrate a commitment to societal and environmental responsibilities beyond profits. This shift presents marketing agencies with a strategic opportunity to bridge the alignment gap. They can assist their clients in recognising and articulating their role as purpose-driven organisations that contribute to the SDGs. It is imperative for these agencies to shape and direct the sometimes nebulous goals of an organisation into a cohesive and compelling brand purpose. The purpose of a brand is to connect meaningfully both inside the company and out in the wider world, touching every aspect of what the brand represents. Considering the danger of a brand purpose coming across as insincere, there is a significant duty for brand managers and marketing agencies to tread carefully and authentically in this area. A lack of authenticity in brand purpose can backfire, undermining trust and harming the brand's overall value.

Our findings should encourage brand and agency managers to ensure that brand purpose aligns with sustainable practices not merely as an afterthought but as a cornerstone of organisational decision-making (Hatch and Schultz, 2010). Especially crucial in sustaining authenticity in the eyes of stakeholders is the commitment to a long-term strategic perspective. Lastly, our study suggests that most agency managers believe that for a brand purpose to be genuinely authentic and not perceived as a marketing veneer, it must be substantiated by genuine, impactful actions that promote social change and contribute to sustainable goals. Token gestures or superficial commitments can lead to scepticism and accusations of 'purpose-washing' (Sarkar and Kotler, 2020). This argument suggests that marketing agencies and brand managers should be clear

about 'brand purpose' as central to the brand identity (Williams et al., 2022) and not conflate it with 'social purpose', which seems tangential.

8. Limitations and direction for future research

Our study offers valuable insights but is subject to certain limitations that future research should consider addressing. For instance, we investigated brand purpose by interviewing an expert audience - marketing agency managers. Interviews, typically adopted in qualitative research, produce meaning through double hermeneutics, a two-step interpretation process in which participants' interpretations are interpreted by researchers. To broaden the applicability and depth of our understanding of brand purpose, future studies should extend their reach to a wider array of stakeholders, including consumers, employees, and brand managers. Furthermore, our study is an initial exploration into brand purpose and what makes it seem authentic in stakeholders' eyes. As a result, subsequent research might delve deeper into the construct of brand purpose using diverse methodologies such as ethnographic studies, longitudinal case studies, or narrative analyses. Lastly, the contextual specificity of our findings to the particular sectors and cultural settings we studied suggests a need for future qualitative research in varied contexts. Such studies should explore how brand purpose is articulated and perceived across different industries, cultural environments, and consumption practices, enhancing the contextual breadth and global relevance of brand purpose research in marketing. Finally, further investigation into how brand purpose and its perception might differ between developed and developing economies could offer nuanced understandings of global consumer expectations and brand strategy efficacy.

9. References

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