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# Cultural perceptions of sustainability marketing initiatives: insights from retail professionals in global shopping centers

Saara Julkunen, Jonna Koponen and Vilma Luostarinen

Department of Business, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio, Finland

## ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined how cultural perceptions influence sustainability initiatives in the global retail sector. Retail professionals are positioned at a crucial intersection between culture and sustainability and thus offer unique insights into this phenomenon. We therefore explored the influence of cultural perspectives on sustainability marketing, as seen through the lens of 12 retail professionals and one global sustainability project leader who worked for a global retail chain that operates 47 shopping centers in different countries. The study's theoretical framework was built upon previous research, and we employed thematic analysis combined with an abductive approach. Our findings revealed that sustainability marketing was critically influenced by cultural perceptions, which varied substantially from one country to another. The importance placed on and implementation of sustainability in marketing management in the shopping centers thus differed significantly across the various cultural contexts. To enhance competitiveness, the retail professionals emphasized the need to avoid greenwashing and to differentiate their shopping centers from those of their competitors through unique sustainability marketing strategies. This study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating that retail professionals' perceptions of the value of sustainability in shopping centers can generate a competitive advantage in different cultural environments. From a managerial standpoint, sustainability marketing should become a cornerstone of business strategy to mark a shift in mindset rather than a mere marketing option.

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## KEYWORDS

Cultural perceptions;  
sustainability; sustainability  
marketing; shopping centers;  
retailing professionals

## Introduction

The World Commission on Environment and Development (United Nations 2024) defined sustainability as the process of meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs – a concept also emphasized by A. Kumar, Prakash, and Kumar (2021). Accordingly, sustainability concerns are becoming increasingly relevant in the retail sector, where professionals should lead sustainability as part of a strategy that involves understanding consumers' needs and purchasing decisions, as these reflect their general attitudes and awareness of

**CONTACT** Saara Julkunen  [saara.julkunen@uef.fi](mailto:saara.julkunen@uef.fi)

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sustainability. Even though organizations often implement sustainability initiatives<sup>1</sup> as part of their corporate strategies, as shown in the studies by, for example, by Tata and Prasad (2015) and Manninen and Huiskonen (2022), no consensus exists on the reasons companies should adopt sustainability marketing<sup>2</sup> strategies or the methods they should apply. These topics remain understudied (Sander et al. 2021), so in this study, we explored retail professionals' perspectives on how cultural perceptions influence sustainability initiatives in 13 shopping centers owned by a global retail chain that operates in various countries on different continents.

In retailing, consumer culture is understood as a densely interwoven network of global connections between local cultures, with insights drawn regarding the possible actions, emotions, and thoughts of consumers. This understanding predisposes certain patterns of behavior and interpretative schemes to be more prevalent than others (Arnould and Thompson 2005). In terms of the interplay between culture and sustainability issues, we concur with Miska, Szócs, and Schiffinger's (2018) proposition that culture, as a complex concept, has varying effects on sustainability. We therefore propose that it is possible to identify differences in retailers' perceptions of local and global consumer cultures and their strategic actions, such as sustainability marketing management, across different countries and continents. These varied perceptions of retail professionals can be observed through, for example, their general discussions and the practices and strategies employed in shopping centers across continents. Previous research has focused less on the influence of informal institutions, such as culture, on sustainability and more on that of formal institutions, such as political and economic rules and regulations.

According to the literature (Carter and Rogers 2008; Elkington 1998), the concept of sustainability involves ecological, economic, and social dimensions. The focus of the ecological dimension is on the environmental impacts of activities, with the aim of ensuring that natural resources are preserved and protected for future generations. The economic dimension emphasizes the need for economic activities to be conducted in a manner that is financially sustainable both now and in the future. To ensure long-term economic stability, economic growth and development should not deplete the Earth's resources or harm the environment. In the social dimension, human welfare and equity are considered with the intention of promoting social well-being, equity, and justice for all people. The definitions of these dimensions indicate that human rights are 'essential' to sustainable development (United Nations 2024). As a holistic approach, this perspective seeks to integrate ecological integrity, economic prosperity, and social equity to create a sustainable and just world for current and future generations (Carter and Rogers 2008; Elkington 1998). In the retail context, it encourages research to identify cultural perceptions of sustainability initiatives that involve a professional marketing management approach.

In line with the work of Dennis et al. (2002), we defined a shopping center as a planned and centrally managed retail space that encompasses at least three retail entities. Since shopping centers play a crucial role in strategizing against sustainability challenges (Tascioglu et al. 2019), we explored how retail professionals' marketing management not only drives consumption but also fosters sustainable practices that can lead to competitive advantage. This is in accordance with the definition of sustainability, as it involves practices that satisfy the current needs of human beings without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Ferdous 2010). Despite the

traditional perception of marketing as a catalyst for overconsumption and environmental degradation (Kemper, Michael Hall, and Ballantine 2019), it has emerged as a pivotal tool for encouraging sustainable consumption patterns. Although sustainability is being adopted increasingly by leading corporations (Dyllick and Muff 2016), we observed a gap in the tangible impacts of these practices on global sustainability indicators, which suggests the need for a more profound managerial commitment to sustainability in marketing strategies.

Previous research has also shown the need to balance sustainability with profitability and to maintain a competitive advantage, but tension exists between these two requirements (Kunc et al. 2022). Strategic actions taken via marketing management to address this tension reflect consumer culture and illustrate the interactions between varied cultural environments and perceptions and social resources (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

Through this study, we responded to a call by Kunc et al. (2022) for qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of sustainability marketing in shopping centers. Notably, we expanded on this undertaking by examining cultural perceptions of sustainability marketing initiatives and focusing on shopping centers operating in several countries and varied cultural environments. The following two research questions were addressed in this study:

- (1) *How do the cultural perceptions of retail professionals influence sustainability marketing in shopping centers located in various countries worldwide?*
- (2) *What role does the tension between sustainability and competitive advantage play in shopping centers located in different countries worldwide?*

To address these research questions, we collected empirical data by interviewing 12 retail professionals and one global sustainability project leader from Ingka Group, which operates in 15 different markets globally. The data were analyzed using a qualitative theme analysis (Birkinshaw, Brannen, and Tung 2011). Our findings revealed that sustainability marketing is critically influenced by different cultural perceptions. Consequently, the importance and implementation of sustainability in marketing management within shopping centers differ across diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, the results highlighted that retail professionals perceive sustainability marketing strategies as a source of competitive advantage that is applicable in both local and global market contexts. However, we also identified a significant challenge related to the potential for shifts in consumer behavior and consumption patterns (Fuentes, Wiese, and Anne Wiese, Associate Professor Ste, Dr 2015; Lehner and Anne Wiese, Associate Professor Ste, Dr 2015). This challenge manifests as a tension between genuine sustainability efforts and the pursuit of a competitive advantage. Issues such as greenwashing (Szabo and Webster 2021) and notable skepticism (Chen and Chang 2013) complicate the relationship between sustainability and competitiveness. A novel finding of this study was that skepticism not only dampens optimism for ambitious sustainability marketing strategies but underscores the urgent need for educational and awareness campaigns to bridge the gap between aspirations and reality.

Our study makes several important contributions to the existing research on sustainability marketing within the context of global retailing, particularly in shopping centers.

First, we emphasize the profound influence of cultural perceptions on sustainability marketing and highlight its inherent reliance on societal norms and practices (Cho et al. 2013; Mandler et al. 2021; Tata and Prasad 2015). Our findings suggest that the effectiveness of sustainability marketing strategies is deeply intertwined with the cultural context in which they are deployed. Second, while previous studies have acknowledged the benefits of sustainability and its influence on competitive advantage (Ferrell, Hartline, and Brian 2021; Tascioglu et al. 2019), our study shows that retail professionals' insights into sustainability can significantly enhance the competitive advantage of shopping centers both locally and globally. Third, we expand the existing literature on the relationship between sustainability and competitive advantage and demonstrate how tensions, such as the risk of greenwashing (Szabo and Webster 2021), pose significant challenges to the scope and effectiveness of sustainability marketing. This underscores the necessity of rigorous accuracy in strategy implementation and advertising actions. Fourth, our findings advocate for a dual approach to enhance competitiveness, that is, by avoiding greenwashing while positioning shopping centers distinctly against their competitors. This balanced strategy is crucial for realizing the full potential of sustainability marketing and to strengthen the competitive position of local and global retail entities. This strategic approach also emphasizes the creation and maintenance of sustainable relationships with customers, society, and the environment, which expands the findings of V. Kumar, Rahman, and Ahmad Kazmi (2013) and Sander et al. (2021). Finally, we extend the findings of Kunc et al. (2022), as our study demonstrates how the varied cultural perceptions among retail professionals influence the rapidly evolving sustainability marketing practices in shopping centers globally.

## Literature review

Building on the gaps we identified, we undertook a comprehensive examination of the theoretical foundations of sustainability marketing in shopping centers and, in particular, the influence of cultural perspectives on such marketing. The theoretical positioning in the literature indicated that cultural perceptions are crucial for developing sustainability marketing that resonates with both local and global audiences in the retail sector. The impacts of these factors on shopping centers across different countries are shown in Table 1, which lists papers essential to this topic and the position of our (completed) study within this field. In the table, we have categorized the research as sustainability marketing and business development, cultural perceptions of sustainability marketing, and sustainability as a competitive advantage in shopping centers.

### *Sustainability marketing and business development*

Sustainability marketing, which originated from ecological marketing in the early 1970s, gained significant attention in the late 1980s as consumer awareness of environmental impacts began to influence buying behaviors. This shift toward sustainability led companies to make increased efforts to meet both regulatory and consumer expectations (Gleim et al. 2023). Such initiatives involved not only offering sustainable products but also implementing sustainability marketing strategies to bolster a firms' images to enhance their competitive advantage (Sander et al. 2021; White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019).

**Table 1.** Positioning of our study in comparison with the extant literature.

Essential papers in earlier research and our study's position in the retail field	Sustainability marketing and business development	Cultural perceptions of sustainability marketing	Sustainability as a competitive advantage in shopping centers
White, Habib, and Hardisty (2019). How to shift consumer behaviors to be more sustainable: A literature review and guiding framework.	X		
Gleim et al. (2023). Is doing right all that matters in sustainability marketing? The role of fit in sustainability marketing strategies.	X		
Elg and Welinder (2022). Sustainability and retail marketing: Corporate, product, and store perspectives.	X		
Cronin et al. (2011). Green marketing strategies: An examination of stakeholders and the opportunities they present.	X		
Tascioglu et al. (2019). The impact of retailers' sustainability and price on consumers' responses in different cultural contexts.	X	X	
Yan, Hean, and Wang (2019). Powering sustainable consumption: The roles of green consumption values and power distance belief.	X	X	
Lehner and Anne Wiese, Associate Professor Ste, Dr (2015). Translating sustainability: The role of the retail store.	X		
Fuentes, Wiese, and Anne Wiese, Associate Professor Ste, Dr (2015). Images of responsible consumers: Organizing the marketing of sustainability.	X		
V. Kumar, Rahman, and Ahmad Kazmi (2013). Sustainability marketing strategy: An analysis of recent literature.	X		
Sander et al. (2021). Green or social? An analysis of environmental and social sustainability advertising and its impact on brand personality, credibility and attitude.	X		
Gunn and Mont (2014). Choice editing as a retailers' tool for sustainable consumption.	X		
Melović et al. (2020). Attracting green consumers as a basis for creating sustainability marketing strategy on the organic market relevance for sustainable agriculture business development.	X		
Szabo and Webster (2021). Perceived greenwashing: The effects of green marketing on environmental and product perceptions.		X	
Tata and Prasad (2015). National cultural values, sustainability beliefs, and organizational initiatives.	X	X	
Mandler et al. (2021). Performance consequences of marketing standardization/adaptation: A systematic literature review and future research agenda.	X	X	
Kunc et al. (2022). Social dimension of shopping centers' operation: Managerial perspectives.	X		X
Ekström and Jönsson (2022). Orchestrating retail in small cities.			X
The current study	X	X	X

Research has shown that retail firms aim to achieve paramount market positions by building solid brand images and outstanding reputations through sustainability initiatives (Elg and Welinder 2022). Such initiatives are further intended to enhance their operational effectiveness, redefine business success, and secure a competitive advantage (Cronin et al. 2011; Gleim et al. 2023). However, only a few studies have delineated the tension between sustainability and competitive advantage in a global corporation operating in shopping centers in different countries.

Retail strategies reflect a broad professional commitment to sustainability, which highlights the intricate relationships between ethical practices (Cronin et al. 2011; Yan, Keh, and Wang 2021), consumer expectations (White, Habib, and Hardisty 2019), and corporate strategies (Elg and Welinder 2022; Gleim et al. 2023) in fostering a more sustainable and responsible retail environment. Such a professional mindset regarding sustainability fosters ethical considerations and leads organizations to evaluate the alignment between their socially responsible initiatives and the potential for creating synergies that contribute significantly to global sustainability efforts. Even though firms aim to position themselves for long-term resilience and success through sustainable practices (Tascioglu et al. 2019), research on the long-term organizational goals of sustainability is lacking. Challenges therefore remain, as initiatives often do not meet consumer expectations and are occasionally greeted with skepticism (Chen and Chang 2013).

Lehner and Anne Wiese, Associate Professor Ste, Dr (2015) described how a retailer's role in promoting sustainable consumption is influenced by the purchase context and consumers' perceptions of the sociopsychological environment. Meanwhile, Fuentes, Wiese, and Anne Wiese, Associate Professor Ste, Dr (2015) explored the concept of responsible consumers and argued that the effectiveness of sustainability marketing depends on the understanding of their interests and lifestyles. This approach suggests that retailers' perceptions of responsible consumers fundamentally shape their sustainability marketing strategies. Companies strive to improve their images through sustainability marketing strategies – often referred to as 'market-oriented sustainability' (Crittenden et al. 2011) – which emphasizes the creation and maintenance of sustainable relationships with customers, society, and the environment (V. Kumar, Rahman, and Ahmad Kazmi 2013; Sander et al. 2021). However, from the standpoint of retail professionals, sustainability is not merely about addressing immediate environmental and social challenges; it is about embedding it into their core strategic planning, decision-making processes, and marketing practices. Again, the goal of a competitive advantage globally enforces the development of sustainability marketing strategies in changing market environments (Tascioglu et al. 2019). For instance, Ferrell, Hartline, and Brian (2021) described a marketing strategy as a blend of art and science focused on creating value by responding to the needs of consumers and the organization, thereby highlighting the critical role of marketing in building customer relationships. However, traditional marketing strategies often overlook sustainability considerations and instead focus on the environmental facets of sustainability instead of functional marketing areas, such as social and economic sustainability issues.

Yan, Hean, and Wang (2019) identified *the pressure to foster sustainable consumption* as a crucial factor in addressing environmental sustainability issues, particularly through green consumption shaped by values and power distance beliefs. Gunn and Mont (2014)

proposed a traditional model of green consumerism that targets a niche market willing to pay a premium for green products. They suggested that retailers could promote sustainable consumption by simply offering sustainable choices alongside conventional products, thereby empowering ethical consumer decisions. According to retail professionals, green marketing has emerged as a strategic issue for differentiation, and it has prompted companies to embrace the green trend by offering socially and environmentally responsible products and services (Chen and Chang 2013). Melović et al. (2020) emphasized the growing pressure to mitigate the negative impacts of industrial development while promoting economic growth and highlighted the importance of attracting green consumers in the organic market for sustainable agricultural business development. As a dark side of sustainability, Szabo and Webster (2021) delved into perceptions of greenwashing by focusing on how green marketing impacts environmental and product perceptions. The issue of greenwashing, or misleading consumers regarding environmental practices, emphasizes the need for authenticity in sustainability claims (Parguel, Benoît-Moreau, and Larceneux 2011). However, no research has been conducted on how green marketing is managed in terms of sustainability and competitive advantage in the shopping centers of a global company operating in different countries. The scarcity of research examining sustainability marketing strategies and practices employed by firms and professionals (Gilal et al. 2021; Gleim et al. 2023) underscores the urgent need for studies that address this critical intersection as well as the evolving challenges and opportunities in sustainability marketing.

### ***Cultural perceptions of sustainability marketing***

The cultural perceptions of retail professionals can significantly influence how sustainability initiatives are perceived, adopted, and implemented. For instance, consumer culture theory, as defined by Arnould and Thompson (2005), examines the social framework of consumer culture, in which the relationship between lived culture and the resources that sustain lifestyles is mediated through market mechanisms. Furthermore, culture is conceptualized as the structure of experience, meaning, and action (Geertz 2008). Marketing initiatives, particularly those that are sensitive to cultural nuances, play a vital role in this mediation, as they resonate with local values while introducing global consumer norms. Kaynak and Herbig (2014) extended this discussion by highlighting the complexities and dynamics of markets in cross-cultural marketing, which involves selling products and services globally and within culturally diverse groups in a single country. The authors emphasized that, in today's global environment, every marketing interaction along the value chain – which may involve suppliers, account representatives, and order processors in different countries – is prone to cultural interactions and potential misunderstandings.

Cho et al. (2013) stated that culture encompasses distinct schools of thought and practices, which are deeply rooted in individuals, and these significantly influence consumption. Tata and Prasad (2015) elaborated that culture comprises perceptions, thought processes, and decision-making strategies solidified over time into standard operating procedures, traditions, and behaviors that guide societal actions. These cultural perceptions encompass beliefs, values, and symbolic systems that evolve and are passed down through generations, thereby shaping consumption patterns. Tascioglu et al. (2019)

showed the relationships between brand identities, competitive advantage, and profitability and highlighted the influence of retailers' sustainability efforts and pricing strategies on consumer responses across different cultural landscapes.

Akgün, Keskin, and Şentürk (2014) argued that cultural variations and customer preferences necessitate marketing adaptation, which is contrary to the uniformity sought through standardization for brand recognition. The debate regarding standardization and adaptation in international marketing management (Gilligan and MartinHird 2013; Mandler et al. 2021) further complicates the integration of sustainability into marketing strategies. This discourse reveals a gap in the literature regarding the intersection of culture and sustainability marketing despite evidence that culture significantly impacts sustainability beliefs and initiatives, as shown by Tata and Prasad (2015). They suggested that sustainability orientation and organizational capacity can moderate the relationship between sustainability beliefs and actions and emphasized the need to understand sociocultural differences when interpreting sustainability. This is particularly relevant in shopping centers, which bring together diverse cultures and values, and highlights the importance of culture in sustainability marketing in global contexts. The gap between culture and sustainability marketing indicates the need for a focused examination of how cultural influences shape sustainability marketing in shopping centers and emphasizes the interconnectedness of local and global retail practices, cultural exchange, and sustainability efforts. Through targeted marketing and an understanding of cultural nuances, companies can navigate the local and global interactions shaping consumer culture and drive the integration of sustainable practices into the global retail landscape.

### ***Sustainability as a competitive advantage in shopping centers***

Amidst the interplay of competitive advantage and sustainability, shopping centers are characterized by rapid modernization and constant evolution (Kunc et al. 2022), which highlights the importance of including social dimensions in the sustainable retail practices of shopping centers. According to Kunc et al. (2022), shopping centers have transcended their traditional retail roles to become hubs of new experiences, social interactions, and leisure activities. These centers – popular for their amalgamation of stores, entertainment, and services – undergo constant modifications and modernization, which reflects the retail sector's dynamic nature.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of shopping center management in achieving success and ensuring sustainability (Hänninen and Paavola 2021; Kunc et al. 2022). Unlike other business entities, the management of shopping centers uniquely focuses on satisfying the needs of consumers, employees, and individual retailers and tenants. Matthysen, Pelser, and Prinsloo (2019) noted the escalating competition for consumers' attention and spending, which emphasizes the critical role of effective marketing strategies in sustaining the performance and future viability of shopping centers. For example, entertainment has emerged as a key element in the sustainability marketing strategies of shopping centers to differentiate them from competitors and enhance customer engagement and profitability. While focusing on revenue and profit, the aim of sustainability marketing is also to improve the well-being of consumers, employees, tenants, the local community, and other stakeholders. Ekström and Jönsson (2022) proposed that shopping centers can even serve as educational spaces where consumers

can gain knowledge, notably in areas such as sustainability and health. This information dissemination not only serves as a potent marketing strategy but also aligns with the evolving concerns and cultures of today's consumers and has prompted shopping centers to integrate sustainability principles into their operations and marketing endeavors.

Communication plays a vital role in fostering sustainability and competitiveness in shopping centers (Kunc et al. 2022). Maintaining an open dialogue with consumers and employees enhances mutual trust and supports sustainable relationships with all stakeholders. Both internal and external communication strategies, including sustainable event marketing, can reinforce sustainability-oriented values and encourage employee and consumer behavioral change. This approach to sustainability marketing in shopping centers offers new insights that build upon the foundational research of Kunc et al. (2022), which highlights its novelty and the evolving landscape of retail sustainability practices. However, little evidence exists on the cultural perceptions of retail professionals' influence on sustainability marketing in shopping centers located in different countries worldwide. Moreover, there is no deep understanding of the tension between sustainability and competitive advantage in global corporations that manage shopping centers locally.

## Methodology

The research philosophy of this study was based on an ontological understanding of relativism (Birkinshaw, Brannen, and Tung 2011), in particular, that people's constructions can be understood in multiple realities (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2016; Guba and Lincoln 1994). Furthermore, we viewed subjectivism as an epistemological assumption (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Accordingly, our goal in this study was to rely on the participants' reality, which could be understood through their subjective perceptions and interpretations (Croucher and Cronn-Mills 2015). Furthermore, as researchers, we accepted that our understanding would be created jointly through the interactions between ourselves and the study participants (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2016).

For this study, we adopted abductive research logic (Dubois and Gadde 2002). Abductive research logic is based on researchers' pre-understanding of the phenomenon when searching for the simplest and most likely explanation for their observations. The method is particularly valuable in exploratory research, in which specific outcomes are not predicted. Abductive reasoning enables researchers to be open to new insights and innovative theories that emerge from the data, which makes it a dynamic and flexible approach to understanding complex issues. It acknowledges that researchers' initial understanding of phenomena may be incomplete and that their theories must evolve as new observations are made (Dubois and Gadde 2002). We ensured reliability throughout the data collection by (1) collecting the data carefully, (2) creating a qualitative database, and (3) inviting the interviewees to review the transcribed interview data.

## Company background

To explore the influence of cultural perspectives on sustainability marketing, we focused on the views of retail professionals across a global retail chain, Ingka Centres. Along with IKEA Retail and Ingka Investments, Ingka Centres is part of Ingka Group. Ingka Centres

currently owns 47 shopping centers, which are considered meeting places for a diverse range of people, including families, friends, and citizens in general of all ages. It is thus possible to identify several dimensions of the company's impact on society, the economy, and culture, which opens up a broad array of research considerations, particularly those relevant to fields such as retailing. Ingka Centres has approximately 372 million visitors per year and operates in 15 markets globally. The vision of Ingka Centres, like that of IKEA, is to create a better everyday life for the citizens of the world. This implies balancing economic growth and positive social impact with environmental protection and renewal. In a global context, Ingka Centres has adopted a 'people and planet positive' strategy – which encompasses initiatives such as promoting healthy and sustainable living – with the aim of running climate-positive operations and fostering fairness and inclusivity. In the application of the strategy, shopping centers are considered to be community hubs that serve as the heart of local communities. This signifies the company's broader vision of not merely focusing on commerce but also creating a symbiotic relationship between business operations and generating positive community impacts. Ingka Centres aims to be at the forefront of sustainable consumption by encouraging people to buy only what they love and to make it last (Ingka Centres 2023).

### **Data collection**

The data were collected by interviewing 12 retail professionals and one global sustainability project leader who work at Ingka Centres. The professionals who participated in the interviews were from China, Russia, Portugal, Italy, Spain, Poland, Finland, and Sweden (see [Appendix 2](#)). In particular, we aimed to find interviewees from varied cultural environments. Both individual and collective cultural backgrounds (Hall 1977; Hall and Hall 1990) were therefore involved. The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, and the average duration of each interview was one hour. To ensure coherence and consistency, a standard interview protocol was developed to guide the interviews, which ensured that all the topics were raised, as presented in [Appendix 1](#). We asked 11 open-ended questions during the interviews. The questions were kept broad and general to help the participants describe the content in their own words. In particular, the participants were free to reveal their perspectives during the interviews (Janesick 2014). According to Creswell (2003), the more open-ended questions are, the better, as this allows the researcher gain an in-depth understanding of what the respondents are saying or what they do in their lives. The questions were formed based on the literature review conducted before the empirical study and our consequent pre-understanding.

### **Analysis**

Two researchers conducted the data analysis by carefully reading the interview transcripts multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. We used a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006), in line with Birkinshaw, Brannen, and Tung (2011) and Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016), and the results aligned with the actual situation assessed through subjective perceptions and interpretations.

The analysis started with the two researchers analyzing the data individually. As shown in [Table 2](#), the progression of the analyses progressed from left to right. The researchers



**Table 2.** Structuring the theme analysis.

Examples of quotations	First-order category	Second-order category	Aggregate dimensions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is some kind of structure and some kind of culture in which pollution is discussed, for instance. (Italy, Interviewee 1)</li> <li>- There are always sustainability components you can utilize. (Poland, Interviewee 2)</li> <li>- We can make our own plan just to try to build a far-reaching sustainability strategy to meet the needs and desires of our consumers. (China, Interviewee 2)</li> <li>- We have different colors [and] signs, so people get more information, and they understand how they have to recycle, so we try to educate people. (Russia, Interviewee 1)</li> <li>- Well, it's a huge competitive advantage, especially if you can stand out from your competitors in some way. And it's quite pointless at the moment to talk about green energy or, you know, those kinds of hygiene factors. Nowadays, consumers usually assume that those kinds of hygiene factors are in place. (Global leader)</li> <li>- We try to create a link between business and our way to have a positive impact on the community we are situated in. (China, Interviewee 1)</li> <li>- It is crazy in terms of competition. Most of the centers around Italy are network-related, so there are bigger players, international players. (Italy, Interviewee 1)</li> <li>- Sometimes the most attractive things are, for example, made from plastic, or when you want to print something on the right paper, you need to order it from a printing house that is in another part of the country, and then the transport is probably not very sustainable. (Poland, Interviewee 1)</li> <li>- I think there is a very thin line between greenwashing and being sustainable in marketing, and it is hard to avoid some false steps. (Poland, Interviewee 1)</li> <li>- We are planning our actions around sustainability, and we have this dilemma regarding whether this would be considered greenwashing. (Poland, Interviewee 2)</li> <li>- The idea of sustainability is quite big. It touches on so many different topics, and there is always the idea of greenwashing referring to the social washing of the business. Sometimes when you try to work with everyday activities, they are small, so it is difficult for consumers to see them, but when you become bolder, it sounds like you become bolder about greenwashing or social washing. (Italy, Interviewee 1)</li> </ul>	<p>Understanding sustainability with modern consumption</p> <p>Managing and fostering perceptible shifts in attitudes toward sustainable consumption</p> <p>Understanding of a competitive advantage integrated with sustainability marketing strategies</p> <p>Sustainability marketing management as a tool for achieving a competitive advantage</p> <p>The tension between sustainability and a competitive advantage</p> <p>Perceptions of the benefits of sustainability</p> <p>Perceptions of the inconvenience of sustainability, for example, greenwashing</p>	<p>Perceived understanding of sustainability as a part of modern retailing practices</p> <p>Perceived understanding of sustainability marketing as creating a competitive advantage</p> <p>Green marketing as part of sustainability marketing</p>	<p>Sustainability marketing and business development</p>

(Continued)

**Table 2.** (Continued).

Examples of quotations	First-order category	Second-order category	Aggregate dimensions
- <i>A slow but perceptible shift in attitudes toward sustainability signals a growing interest among the populace. . . . Responsible consumption has not yet won the mass market, and the city's infrastructure is not ideal for an eco-friendly lifestyle, but the changes are already noticeable, and a large number of people are interested in sustainable development issues.</i> (Russia, Interviewee 2)	Cultural backgrounds significantly shape the management of sustainability marketing in shopping centers	Understanding perceived sustainability in culturally varied markets	Cultural perceptions of sustainability marketing in shopping centers
- <i>I believe today people prefer to buy a little bit more [of sustainable products] because they feel they are also supporting [sustainability].</i> (Portugal, Interviewee 2)	Skepticism toward the effectiveness of recycling and broader sustainability		
- <i>You know, in China, almost all the people know that environmental protection is of great importance, but there is a gap between what they know and what they actually do. Some people think that sustainability is very important, but I think the topic is a little bit far away from their lives.</i> (China, Interviewee 2)	A need for guidance and education		
- <i>Surveys have shown that one of the things consumers really appreciate in the area is taking action [to help them] live more sustainable lives, helping and educating consumers on sustainability, and offering more sustainable choices.</i> (Sweden, Interviewee 2)	Influence of professionals on sustainability marketing management considering cultural perceptions	Managing sustainability marketing and cultural perceptions in the global retail context	
- <i>I believe that we should not be shy to tell [consumers] what we are doing</i> (Portugal, Interviewee 2)			
- <i>One of the things that our consumers really want is for us to take action to help them live more sustainable lives.</i> (Sweden, Interviewee 1)			
- <i>I have to say, I think I have already mentioned it, I'm proud to be part of this company, and I really feel like I identify with all these things where sustainability is involved.</i> (Spain, Interviewee 1)	Importance of being committed to the sustainability marketing management ideology of the company		
- <i>We are committed to sustainability and have everything covered regarding sustainability. In the very beginning, it was divided into two: sustainability regarding the planet and sustainability regarding people.</i> (Spain, Interviewee 2)			
- <i>It is internal and external. We always try to protect our planet, and it's about the materials that we use, the way we communicate – it's much more digital now than in the past.</i> (Portugal, Interviewee 1)			

(Continued)



Table 2. (Continued).

Examples of quotations	First-order category	Second-order category	Aggregate dimensions
- <i>We try to localize it a little bit, so we absolutely have to do it, sometimes [to address] the matter of cultural bias, sometimes to make the message strong enough for the locals.</i> (Italy, Interviewee 1)	Standardization vs. the adaptation of marketing strategies as key to having a competitive advantage	Globalization vs. localization in sustainability marketing	
- <i>[We are] promoting a global image in the shopping centers.</i> (Poland, Interviewee 2)			
- <i>[We] translate it and create a graphic with our local advertising agency, and we transform it in the final campaign for our consumers, so we use it like an umbrella.</i> (Spain, Interviewee 2)	The cultural environment and perceptions of the country on sustainability has an impact on the sustainability marketing in the shopping center		
- <i>You don't have this, how to say, like, effectiveness. You know, maybe they talk about how they want to be sustainable, but we actually do something practical. I think it's a good action from our side.</i> (Poland, Interviewee 2)			
- <i>Talking about the planet part or the people and planet-positive program, we had a contest last year. . . . The local culture is not strong enough, so we have to combine the local purpose with that of the global main company.</i> (Italy, Interviewee 1)	Cultural perceptions characterize the competitive advantage achieved from the sustainability marketing in the shopping center		
- <i>I'm in a lucky situation in that my competitors are not engaged much in sustainability topics.</i> (Poland, Interviewee 2)			
- <i>The local culture regarding sustainability is not strong enough, so we have to mix the purpose with something that is easier for the community, so [we] use something that is easy to run – an activity for the kids or a contest—[to convey] our messages.</i> (Spain, Interviewee 1)			

began by carefully reading and re-reading the data to identify keywords, trends, and ideas that would help structure the analysis. To build a common analysis, they used the so-called tight approach based on the analysis of analysis (Jick 1979). Specifically, the researchers combined their individual analyses, compared them, and examined any differences. The themes were compared in-depth to achieve a cross-case analysis of the participants from the different countries (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). The researchers resolved disagreements through discussion and further analysis of the interviews. When needed, they contacted the interviewees for a second time and asked them to clarify their responses. Finally, the researchers wrote and agreed upon the final version of the findings.

We employed an *in vivo* methodology, as outlined in Table 2 (Geiger 2017; Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). In the context of theory building, the aim of this approach was to progressively deepen, refine, and enhance our initial theoretical understanding. Examples of the quotations used in the analysis are presented on the left side of Table 2. The first-order codes represent the content of the themes, while the second-order categories denote each main theme analyzed in the Findings section. Finally, two aggregate dimensions are presented on the right side of the table: sustainability marketing and business model development and cultural perceptions of sustainability marketing in shopping centers. Although the aggregate dimensions were derived from the data, they are also closely integrated with the theoretical framework of the study.

## Findings

In this section, we first address sustainability marketing and the issues between sustainability and competitive advantage and the associated strategic tension. Second, we delineate a novel understanding of how cultural perceptions can effectively influence sustainability marketing strategies in diverse cultural contexts.

The insights in our findings were drawn from the experiences and perceptions of the retail professionals and highlighted that sustainability is not only a permanent feature but also a critical aspect of marketing management in shopping centers. Our analysis showed that the cultural perceptions of these professionals regarding sustainability marketing efforts in shopping centers were shaped by a complex interplay of cultural values, perceived consumer expectations, market environments, and attitudes toward profitability and competitive advantage. Cultural perceptions of sustainability varied significantly depending on the cultural context under examination. The influence of cultural perceptions was evident in the manner in which socially shared cultural understandings regarding sustainability impacted business operations in the shopping centers, and these differed based on the local context in each country. The quotes from the retail professionals presented in Table 2 highlight that a collective cultural stance toward sustainability shaped the approach to sustainability marketing management and its outcomes in each shopping center, with these effects manifesting as positive or negative. They also show a perceived tension between sustainability in general and the competitive advantage of the shopping centers.

As shown in Table 2, we organized our findings around two main themes derived from our analysis: sustainability marketing and business development and cultural perceptions of sustainability marketing in shopping centers. The former dimension includes the

perceived understanding of sustainability as part of modern retail practice, the perceived understanding of sustainability marketing to create competitive advantage, and green marketing as part of sustainability marketing. The latter dimension comprises the understanding of perceived sustainability in culturally varied markets (e.g. managing sustainability marketing and cultural perceptions in the global retail context) and globalization versus localization in sustainability marketing. This structured approach enabled us to dissect the intricate relationships between cultural perceptions, sustainability marketing, and competitive advantage in the global retail landscape.

### ***Sustainability marketing and business development***

*Perceived understanding of sustainability as part of modern retail practice* showed that the common thread across the professionals' perspectives was the recognition of sustainability as a serious concern with respect to modern consumption, varying levels of consumer engagement, and integration into daily life. All the interviewees described how they managed and fostered sustainability in the form of responsible, modern consumption, as described by Interviewee 2 from Poland: 'There are always these sustainability components you can utilize.' Interviewee 1 from Italy even saw shopping centers as part of the social debate: 'There is some kind of structure and some kind of culture in which pollution is discussed, for instance. . . . we are participating in these discussions.'

In particular, the retail professionals indicated that when combined with modern consumption in the socioeconomic context, sustainability plays a crucial role in shaping consumer attitudes toward sustainability and consumption. They underlined that effective sustainability marketing must consider local nuances and advocated for strategies that both emphasize environmental benefits and align with the economic and social realities of the consumer base.

The interviewees also discussed the importance of making sustainability accessible and actionable, leveraging community and emotional connections, and ensuring continuous engagement to facilitate the prioritization of sustainability. These insights suggested a multifaceted approach to promoting sustainability that encompasses the provision of accessible sustainable choices. This holistic strategy could bridge the gap between awareness and action to foster a culture of sustainability that permeates regions and becomes embedded in individuals' everyday choices. Interviewee 2 from China stated, 'We can make our own plan to try to build a far-reaching sustainability strategy to meet the needs and desires of our consumers.' In Poland, a unique characteristic influencing the consumption of sustainability marketing was the role of shopping centers, predominantly those located on city outskirts, as communal meeting spots. In particular, the Polish retail professionals highlighted their perception of being forerunners in the development and management of sustainable consumption practices.

This study highlighted the retail professionals' perceptions of consumption and the influence of economic cycles and demographic trends on sustainability. The interviewees described the low levels of willingness of consumers to consider sustainability part of their daily lives, which rendered sustainability a less significant factor in their purchasing decisions. They highlighted the necessity of educational campaigns tailored to regional audiences to elevate the importance of sustainability in consumers' consumption criteria. Interviewee 1 from Russia clarified this: 'We have different colors [and] signs, so people get

more information, and they understand how they have to recycle, so we try to educate people.' Moreover, the professionals emphasized the potential of shopping centers as pivotal platforms for promoting sustainability and suggested that leveraging these communal spaces for educational purposes could significantly enhance the public's engagement with sustainability issues. The role of retailers as both participants in social debates and business developers was emphasized, which demonstrated that the retail professionals perceived sustainability issues as critical. This recognition not only underscored the relevance of sustainability in the industry but also suggested that embracing these issues could contribute to a competitive advantage.

Through our analysis, we found that the *perceived understanding of sustainability marketing can produce a competitive advantage* when it is integrated with strategic work. However, the factors leading to a competitive advantage were dependent on the different sustainable development stages of the countries. One factor that all the participants agreed on was that a competitive advantage could be gained from being ahead of others with respect to sustainability marketing, as indicated by Interviewee 2 from Poland: 'I'm in a lucky situation in that my competitors are not engaged much in sustainability topics.' In Russia, sustainability marketing efforts were similarly considered a competitive advantage, while in Italy, it was recognized that competitors worked with sustainability, but they usually only did something once a year. At Ingka Shopping Centers, the goal was to incorporate sustainability marketing actions into daily operations, which sometimes required managers to be bold and to make strong decisions. This approach presented a challenge in balancing competitive advantage, including profitability, with the implementation of sustainability initiatives. The emphasis on practical action was highlighted as a key factor that differentiated sustainability marketing at Ingka Shopping Centers from that of its competitors. As one interviewee from Italy noted, 'In other companies here, for example, you don't see this effective strategy; they may talk about wanting to be sustainable, but we actually take practical steps every week. I believe this gives us a significant competitive advantage.'

According to our findings, differentiation from competitors, determining new ways of communicating, and engaging in sustainability marketing were the most important approaches from a marketing management perspective, as described by Interviewee 1 from Spain:

The local culture of sustainability is not strong enough, so we have to mix the purpose with something that is easier for the community, so [we] use something that is easy to run—an activity for the kids or a contest—[to convey] our messages.

The retail professionals also highlighted that it is essential to be persistent when communicating, for example, about sustainability goals and the achievements of the company, as consumers easily forget.

Sustainability marketing was thought to influence consumers' buying behaviors, since it created a positive image of the shopping centers when done persistently.

Well, it's a huge competitive advantage, especially if you can stand out from your competitors in some way. And it's quite pointless at the moment to talk about green energy or, you know, those kinds of hygiene factors. Nowadays, consumers usually assume that those kinds of hygiene factors are in place. (Global leader)

Although several positive influences were noted by the interviewees, a tension between a long-term competitive advantage and sustainability marketing was identified. This tension related to the resources available to them. Interviewee 1 from Italy said,

It is crazy in terms of competition. Most of the centers around Italy are network-related, so there are bigger players, international players. . . . The local culture is not strong enough, so we have to learn how to combine the local purpose with that of the main global company.

Among our findings, *green marketing as part of sustainability marketing* involved perceptions of the benefits and inconvenience of sustainability, for example, in terms of greenwashing. We found the benefits of green marketing to be related to sustainable consumption. According to the retail professionals, this relationship needed to be implemented in their daily business practices and their strategies for managing their shopping centers. This means expectations regarding differentiation had prompted the companies to embrace the green trend by offering environmentally and socially responsible products and services. In general, the interviewed retail professionals indicated that the transition of the retail business and consumption toward green marketing to encourage more environmentally friendly habits was a gradual process, as it can take years to fully acknowledge environmental impacts and foster a willingness to adapt. This challenge was compounded by the prevalent belief that price is a paramount consideration in purchasing decisions. As Interviewee 1 from Poland highlighted, 'For many people, price is the most important criteria when it comes to decisions about what to buy and what not to buy.' This finding reflected the retailers' understanding of consumers' values and attitudes, but it also shaped the environmental and societal discourse required to foster and manage sustainable consumption practices.

The perceptions of the retail professionals indicated that they were committed to the global company's strategies and could identify with part of the company's ideology. Regarding the benefits of green marketing, it was important for them to be responsible for green marketing; they understood the core of green marketing and felt proud to take the associated actions. Such a commitment increased the efforts made toward green marketing actions, as Interviewee 2 from Spain stated: 'We are committed to sustainability and have everything regarding sustainability (including green marketing) divided into two: sustainability regarding the planet and sustainability regarding the people.'

Five of the respondents stated that greenwashing was one of the most challenging factors in sustainability marketing:

I think it is a very hard task to combine sustainability and marketing because sometimes the most attractive things are, for example, made from plastic, or when you want to print something on the right paper, you need to order it from a printing house that is in another part of the country, and then the transport is probably not very sustainable. I think there is a very thin barrier between greenwashing and being sustainable in marketing, and it is hard to avoid some false steps. (Poland, Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 1 from Italy stated:

The idea of sustainability is quite big. It touches on so many different topics, and there is always the idea of greenwashing referring to the social washing of the business. Sometimes when you try to work with everyday activities, they are small, so it is difficult for the consumers to see them, but when you become bolder, it sounds like you become bolder about greenwashing or social washing.

The risk of greenwashing also arose in an interview with the global sustainability project leader of Ingka Group. The interviewee stated that the thin line between sustainability and greenwashing is recognized, and it influences the level of sustainability communication in the shopping centers. The marketing and communication of sustainability topics must be accurate and offer facts and figures that consumers can rely on. Fun and easy-going communication about sustainability was a thing of the past.

Avoiding greenwashing while being bold in sustainability marketing actions in shopping centers was seen to increase competitive advantage because the empirical data indicated that the retail professionals were apprehensive about applying sustainability marketing for fear of being accused of greenwashing. Ultimately, the shopping centers in which sustainability marketing was applied gained a competitive advantage, as most of their competitors remained silent in this regard.

### ***Cultural perceptions of sustainability marketing in shopping centers***

In terms of *understanding sustainability in culturally varied markets*, our findings revealed that cultural backgrounds significantly shaped the management of sustainability marketing of the shopping centers. From Russia to Sweden, the importance of sustainability was universally acknowledged, but the depth of this acknowledgment and its translation into action varied significantly. In China, the perception was that competitors were doing more on sustainability marketing than the Ingka shopping center. In Poland, competitors were not as engaged in sustainability topics, and the Ingka shopping centers were perceived as leading in sustainability among consumers. In Russia, skepticism toward the effectiveness of recycling and broader sustainability efforts underscored the profound trust gap between consumers and institutions. Interviewee 1 from Russia described this as follows: 'It is Russia, [so] it is really hard for people to believe that our company does recycle.' Innovative approaches implemented in shopping centers, such as exhibitions and educational pop-ups, were aimed at building loyalty and demonstrating the tangible outcomes of sustainability actions to foster an incremental interest in eco-friendly practices. Interviewee 2 from Russia noted, 'Responsible consumption has not yet won the mass market, and the city's infrastructure is not ideal for eco-friendly lifestyles, but the changes are already noticeable, and a large number of people are interested in sustainable development issues.' The feedback from the interviewees indicated a slow but perceptible shift in people's attitudes toward sustainability.

In China, a pronounced gap was apparent between acknowledgment of the importance of sustainability and the incorporation of sustainable actions into consumers' daily life. While awareness regarding environmental protection was widespread, translating this into practical everyday actions was challenging. The retail professionals indicated a need for guidance and education to bridge the gap between knowledge and action. According to Interviewee 2 from China:

You know, in China, almost all the people know that environment protection is of great importance, but there is a gap between what they know and what they actually do. Some people think that sustainability is very important, but I think the topic is a little bit far away from their lives. They don't know how to turn sustainability actions into small daily but accessible actions.

This insight underscores a critical challenge: making sustainability tangible and actionable in the daily lives of consumers. The retail professionals from Portugal agreed that the scenario where sustainability is increasingly valued among consumers is optimistic. The preference for sustainable products is seen not merely as a consumer's consumption choice but as a form of support for sustainability. Here, the concept of community plays a vital role, with individuals acting as ambassadors for sustainability, spreading awareness, and influencing others within their networks. This model leverages modern consumption with personal connections and emotional engagement to foster a culture of sustainability. Interviewee 1 from Portugal reflected on this dynamic:

I believe today people prefer to buy a little bit more [of sustainable products] because they feel they are also supporting [sustainability]. They are the perfect ambassadors for us because they contact other consumers, and they have families, and they spread the word, and when I decide to go somewhere to find something, I decide to go to a place where I know my money will support this cause.

This sentiment highlights a growing consumer desire to contribute to sustainability and the role of emotional engagement in amplifying this commitment.

Regarding the management of sustainability marketing and cultural perceptions in the global retail context, our findings revealed the influence of the retail professionals on sustainability marketing management albeit with due consideration of cultural perceptions. Being part of an international company and having a strong sustainability agenda were considered critical for gaining a competitive advantage. In Spain, the challenge lay in maintaining momentum for sustainability. Consumer interest spiked around events focused on sustainability, which suggested that continuous engagement and communication were crucial to keeping sustainability at the forefront of consumer consciousness and that it should be integrated as part of consumption. This reflects the need for ongoing efforts to integrate sustainability into the fabric of daily life, thereby preventing it from becoming an afterthought once the immediate stimulus is eliminated. For example, when a shopping center organized an event around sustainability, many people participated, but when the event was over, they forgot. 'Therefore, you must constantly be doing or communicating [sustainability] things' (Spain, Interviewee 1). This observation emphasizes the need for ongoing efforts and communication to keep sustainability at the forefront of consumer consciousness. In particular, the entire management team of the shopping center played a significant role in how sustainability was seen by employees. For example, Interviewee 1 from Spain expressed a deep connection with the company's sustainability ethos: 'I hope if one percent of all our actions speak to some people and transform their mindsets, at least one person, it's like a big reward for us.'

According to the retail professionals in Finland and Sweden, sustainability was strongly integrated with consumer behavior, with consumers showing a clear demand for sustainable options when making daily purchase decisions. Trust in sustainability initiatives and the availability of sustainable choices were highlighted as key factors driving this trend. These countries demonstrated a growing trend toward sustainability, which was marked by a strong consumer preference for actions and choices that aligned with sustainable living. This guaranteed the retail professionals' perceptions of a competitive advantage even over the long term. According to Interviewee 1 from Sweden, 'Surveys have shown that one of the things consumers really appreciate in

the area is taking action [to help them] live more sustainable lives, helping and educating consumers on sustainability, and offering more sustainable choices.' This indicates a strong desire from consumers for guidance and options that align with sustainable values and emphasizes the role of businesses in meeting these expectations.

Being committed to the sustainability marketing management ideology of the global company was described as crucial. Despite local influences being notably present and impactful, being part of the global Ingka Group was emphasized, as Interviewee 1 from Spain described: 'I'm very proud to be part of this company, and I really feel like I identify with all these things where sustainability is involved.' Even though the interviewees unanimously recognized Ingka Group's robust commitment to sustainability, they also mentioned that both the local and global aspects should be recognized and managed simultaneously as well as separately in sustainability marketing. Their perceptions took into account the critical role of adaptation versus standardization regarding sustainability marketing; however, this varied across the countries. In China, the strategic use of shopping centers was highlighted as a particularly effective local strategy within the sustainability marketing framework. This sentiment was echoed by Interviewee 1 from Portugal, who suggested a more proactive stance in sharing their sustainability actions: 'I believe that we should not be so shy and should say what we are doing, not because we want to be recognized as the best ones but to show that it's possible to do something and to invite others to do the same.' This perception confirmed that Ingka Centres was not seen as sufficiently vocal regarding local centers' sustainability efforts; instead, it has been committed to maintaining a level of humility that, while admirable, limited the visibility of local initiatives. Despite the varied approaches to sustainability on the different continents, there was a shared sense of pride among the interviewees regarding the company's commitment to sustainability, both locally and globally, as Interviewee 2 from Portugal described: 'It is internal and external. We always try to protect our planet, and it is about the materials that we use and the way we communicate – it's much more digital now than in the past.'

The level of adaptation of standardization in sustainability marketing in the shopping centers was affected by the cultural environments and perceptions of sustainability in the different countries. Our findings indicated numerous similarities and differences regarding standardization among the countries. For example, the meaning of sustainability varied among the consumers in these countries, and culture was influenced by the local the company's actions. With respect to the cultural perceptions that characterize competitive advantage achieved through sustainability marketing in the shopping centers, the interviewees highlighted this as being important to recognize when planning and implementing sustainability marketing locally. When managing sustainability marketing, a common feature for all the shopping centers was the committed adaptation of the global sustainability marketing campaigns, which Interviewee 1 from Poland described as 'promoting a global image in the shopping centers.' Almost all the interviewees agreed that they needed to adapt the global campaign materials to be more suitable for their local markets.

Adapting the actions or bringing something more to the global campaigns to make them more interesting to local consumers was considered crucial for the shopping centers. As noted Interviewee 1 from Italy, *'We try to localize it a little bit, so we absolutely*

*have to do it, sometimes [to address] the matter of cultural bias, sometimes to make the message strong enough for the locals.'*

As a part of their marketing management, the Polish retail professionals saw barriers when adapting sustainability campaign activities and attempting to make them more interesting for local consumers. They saw no chance of success with mass invitations:

What is always hard with sustainability campaigns is that, in the end, we are responsible for the visibility, and we need to deliver the numbers. So, we have this problem that it is great to do the campaign, but in the end, we need to remember that more than anything else, we need campaigns that attract visitors. So, that is why sometimes we change the activities a little bit to make them more attractive for consumers. (Interviewee 1 from Poland)

Such a localized approach, informed by the professionals, highlighted the importance of adapting sustainability marketing strategies to fit the cultural and economic contexts of specific regions so that the shopping centers could gain a competitive advantage in their area. The best opportunities to gain a competitive advantage were perceived as having positive attitudes and a value-based orientation toward sustainability, as indicated by Interviewee 1 from Sweden: 'One of the things that our consumers really want is for us to take action to help them live more sustainable lives.'

Eight of the interviewees agreed that sustainability marketing had given them a competitive advantage; however, their main competitors did not engage in sustainability activities as much or, in certain cases, did not engage in sustainability at all. In this sense, the combination of sustainability and marketing was considered challenging. Moreover, building a common meaning of sustainability with consumers was often considered problematic. Even though consumers brought their own perspectives on sustainability, these were always influenced by bigger brands, such as H&M, Inditex, and Nike, which had high levels of visibility. Smaller local brands therefore did not have an opportunity to achieve the same emphasis on sustainability issues. However, the interviewees stated that they usually adapted the common campaign materials to make them more suitable for the local community. Said Interviewee 1 from Italy, 'No, we adapt them a lot; actually we always do something more to make the campaign a little bit more complete and to get closer to the consumers.' The interviewee, for example, mentioned a local bias that related to cheap clothes and China. They therefore did not want to use campaign materials with only Chinese people since such images could lead to negative associations with cheap clothes.

## Discussion and conclusion

In the current study, we examined how cultural perceptions influence sustainability marketing initiatives in the shopping centers of a global company operating in various countries around the world. Our findings make the following five main contributions to the literature:

- (1) We have shown that sustainability marketing is closely related to cultural perceptions. In particular, we highlighted its inherent reliance on societal norms and practices (Cho et al. 2013; Mandler et al. 2021; Tata and Prasad 2015). Based on the understanding of cultural perceptions varying in different countries, our study

delineates a dual perspective – balancing theoretical commitments to sustainability with the practical realities of consumer actions. This emphasizes the complex relationship between sustainability ideals and consumer behavior. We therefore claim that the effectiveness of sustainability marketing strategies is deeply intertwined with the cultural context in which they are deployed. Moreover, our findings shed more light on the study of Tascioglu et al. (2019), who highlighted the influence of retailers' sustainability efforts and pricing strategies on consumer responses across different cultural landscapes. We assert that social responsibility practices are essential for developing distinct brand identities and supporting and securing a competitive advantage.

- (2) In terms of competitive advantage, Elg and Welinder (2022) observed that sustainability needs to be presented through a solid brand image and reputation, Fuentes, Wiese, and Anne Wiese, Associate Professor Ste, Dr (2015) found sustainability to be framed and enacted differently for responsible consumers, while Melović et al. (2020) approached sustainability marketing from consumers' perspectives instead of considering, for example, the perspectives of marketing representatives. We agree with previous studies that acknowledged the benefits of sustainability and its influence on competitive advantage (Ferrell, Hartline, and Hochstein 2021; Tascioglu et al. 2019); however, our findings also showed that retail professionals' insights into sustainability can significantly enhance the competitive advantage of shopping centers both locally and globally. When the benefits of sustainability were shared positively in society, the value of sustainability was recognized in the shopping center, and the influence of its sustainability marketing produced a competitive advantage. In contrast, when sustainability was not given much importance in society, the influence of sustainability marketing was seen to be incapable of producing a competitive advantage. Accordingly, our findings also underlined the critical role of education and advocacy in shifting consumption patterns toward sustainability and suggest a focus on communication and education to develop positive consumer attitudes toward sustainability. We concur with Kunc et al. (2022), who stated that communication with consumers offers an opportunity for sustainability marketing and can produce competitiveness, particularly among shopping centers, both locally and globally. Specifically, we found that a long timeframe is often needed to create a positive attitude toward sustainability among consumers. This implies that retail professionals perceive local consumers as sharing the communal importance of sustainability.
- (3) We observed tensions in the relationship between sustainability and competitive advantage. While research has indicated a huge disconnect between marketing and sustainability (Dyllick and Muff 2016; Ferdous 2010; Kemper, Michael Hall, and Ballantine 2019), we contend that this relates to changes in consumption and skepticism (Chen and Chang 2013). The benefits of sustainable consumption are acknowledged to retailers; however, skepticism remains regarding significant shifts in consumer behavior and consumption patterns, which indicates a gap between aspiration and reality. We also found that this skepticism decreases optimism when retailers implement ambitious sustainability marketing strategies and revealed the need for education and awareness campaigns to bridge this gap. Tascioglu et al. (2019) showed that high prices negatively moderate consumers' responses to

retailers' sustainability efforts and claimed that high sustainability efforts alongside low price strategies lead to an increase in consumers' commitment, satisfaction, and loyalty. In contrast, our findings pointed to the potential benefits of this strategy for sustainable consumption but did not indicate significant changes in consumer behavior and consumption.

- (4) Our findings revealed that professionals in the retail field have fostered a culture of strategic thinking that includes ethical considerations. This mindset has led organizations to evaluate the alignment between their socially responsible initiatives. Accordingly, we agree with Cronin et al. (2011) and Gleim et al. (2023), who stated that congruent sustainability initiatives can bolster a firm's reputation and operational effectiveness, which can produce a competitive advantage. White, Habib, and Hardisty (2019) highlighted that sustainability initiatives involve not only offering sustainable products but also implementing sustainability marketing strategies to bolster a firm's image. They further emphasized that a firm's competitive advantage could be enhanced through the adoption of corporate social responsibility strategies that intricately intertwine ethical practices, consumer expectations, and corporate strategies. Our findings indicated that retail professionals' insights into sustainable consumption can significantly shape marketing strategies both locally and globally.

We also found a connection with green marketing as a strategic initiative in shopping centers. Yan, Hean, and Wang (2019) indicated that green consumption is influenced by values and power distance beliefs. Chen and Chang (2013) showed that the aim of green marketing is differentiation, which prompts companies to embrace the green trend by offering environmentally and socially responsible products and services. Szabo and Webster (2020) focused on the effects of green marketing by examining environmental and product perceptions. Our findings revealed a thin line between sustainability and greenwashing, which decreased the scope of sustainability marketing in the shopping centers in our study and made it challenging. Szabo and Webster (2021) indicated that significant challenges may foster a risk of tension. This underscores the necessity for rigorous accuracy in strategy implementation and advertising actions to enhance the scope and effectiveness of sustainability marketing. Based on our findings, the influence of sustainability marketing on the competitiveness of global retail companies requires that they avoid greenwashing while simultaneously differentiating their shopping centers from their competitors. We therefore advocate for a dual approach to enhance competitiveness: Companies should avoid greenwashing while positioning their shopping centers as distinct from their competitors. This balanced strategy is crucial for global retail entities to realize the full potential of sustainability marketing and to strengthen their competitive positions.

- (5) Our study contributes to the retail literature by demonstrating how varied cultural perceptions among retail professionals influence rapidly evolving sustainability marketing practices, particularly in shopping centers in different countries. This expands the findings of Kunc et al. (2022) by showcasing the impact of cultural diversity on sustainability marketing in a global retail context. The majority of research on standardization versus adaptation in international marketing management has excluded the sustainability aspect when referring to different marketing

strategies for global companies (see, for example, Gilligan and MartinHird 2013; Mandler et al. 2021). While global standardization versus local adaptation has been shown to complicate the integration of sustainability into marketing strategies, our findings revealed how global sustainability initiatives involving global sustainable management provided economies of scale in the shopping centers of the global company. Global standardization offers a global framework, as shown by Vrontis et al. (2009), as well as opportunities for local adaptation. Our findings indicated no inconsistencies between the global standardization and local adaptations in the marketing strategies of the shopping centers in our study; they can be developed in parallel. However, competitive advantage is context-sensitive and thus heavily influenced by the societal context and the location of the shopping center. However, competitive advantage is context-sensitive and thus heavily influenced by the societal context and the location of the shopping center, so cultural variations and consumer preferences necessitate marketing adaptation (Akgün, Keskin, and Şentürk 2014). Our findings expand the earlier research: when the local understanding of sustainability was low, the professionals we interviewed did not perceive sustainability marketing management as a source of competitive advantage within the nearby shopping center.

### ***Managerial implications***

The findings of our study underscore the importance of understanding and integrating societal attitudes toward sustainability into the marketing and operational strategies of shopping centers. Accordingly, we advise managers to carefully navigate public perceptions to maintain and enhance the competitive advantage of the companies, both locally and globally. In particular, we offer seven recommendations.

First, cultural sensitivity in marketing strategies should be recognized by retail professionals in shopping centers. Managers should recognize and adapt to the cultural perceptions of sustainability that are prevalent in the society in which the shopping center operates. This involves tailoring marketing strategies to align with the local cultural environment and acknowledging that these perceptions can vary significantly across different locations.

Second, leveraging positive attitudes toward sustainability is beneficial for competitive advantage in general. Therefore, a positive societal attitude toward sustainability can be a strong competitive lever for shopping centers. Managers should actively promote sustainable practices and highlight their commitment to sustainability in their marketing communications to align with consumer expectations and values and thereby gain a competitive edge. However, as our findings indicate, challenges may arise when the community's level of understanding of sustainability is low, potentially limiting the effectiveness of such strategies.

Third, we suggest mitigating the negative perceptions of sustainability among consumers in shopping centers. Because societal disregard or skepticism toward sustainability can harm the competitive positioning of a shopping center, managers need to be proactive in addressing and reversing negative attitudes in communities with low levels of understanding through educational campaigns and by showcasing the tangible

benefits of sustainable practices not only for the environment but also for the consumers themselves (e.g. health benefits, cost savings).

Fourth, we recommend incorporating sustainability into the core business strategies of shopping centers. Sustainability should not be viewed merely as a marketing gimmick but should instead be embedded into the core business strategy of the shopping center. This includes sustainable operations, energy use, current global water issues due to heat-waves, you could include water (i.e. water and waste management), and the selection of tenants who adhere to sustainable practices. Managers should consider sustainability as a fundamental component of their value proposition to consumers and tenants.

Fifth, discussions regarding global versus local strategies should be held in shopping centers. For global chains, it is crucial to balance standardized global marketing efforts with localized strategies that resonate with the cultural and societal nuances of each market. While sustainability can be a global goal, its execution and communication must be locally relevant.

Sixth, we strongly recommend that shopping centers invest in sustainable development. Even in the face of skepticism or indifference, investment in sustainable development should be viewed as a long-term strategy rather than a short-term cost. These investments can enhance a shopping center's reputation, attract environmentally conscious consumers, and eventually yield a positive return on investment as consumers' attitudes evolve.

Finally, for retail professionals who aim to support green consumption and avoid greenwashing, it is crucial to adopt authentic, transparent, and accountable measures. This entails ensuring that all claims regarding sustainability are backed by verifiable evidence and standards (e.g. certification from reputable environmental organizations). We encourage the managers of shopping centers to integrate sustainable practices throughout their operations, from sourcing eco-friendly materials to implementing energy-efficient systems and water and waste reduction programs. Education plays a key role; by informing consumers about the environmental impacts of their purchases and how to appropriately dispose of products, shopping centers can foster a genuine culture of sustainability. Furthermore, transparency regarding the challenges and the ongoing journey toward greater sustainability can enhance consumer trust. Avoiding greenwashing not only aligns with ethical business practices but also meets the growing consumer demand for authenticity and environmental stewardship in retailing.

### ***Limitations and future research***

In this study, we explored how the cultural perceptions of sustainability marketing affect the shopping centers of a global company operating in different countries. This study had some limitations that future researchers could address to enrich the understanding of this topic.

Our focus on a single global retail operator presents a limitation in terms of the breadth of perspectives covered. Future research could benefit from examining other retail operators, both local and global, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability marketing practices across different business models and market environments. Because the findings of our study were primarily qualitative in nature, they could be further validated through quantitative research. Such an approach would enable the

hypotheses derived from our findings to be tested on a larger scale and thereby contribute to the generalizability of the results.

In light of the rapid advancements in sustainability, adopting various analytical methods, such as meaning analysis, could unveil deeper insights into the shifting landscape of sustainability marketing. Moreover, our study predominantly reflects the perspectives of retail professionals. Future research could extend the investigation to include other key stakeholders, such as shopping center partners, tenants, and consumers. This would offer a more holistic view of the sustainability marketing ecosystem.

While our study contributes to the understanding of sustainability marketing in the context of shopping centers, acknowledging the aforementioned limitations opens avenues for future research. Expanding the scope to include diverse retail operators, employing quantitative methods for broader applicability, exploring the perspectives of additional stakeholders, and examining potential criticisms of sustainability marketing are recommended steps for future studies. These efforts would significantly enhance the depth and applicability of knowledge in the field of sustainability marketing in the retail sector.

## Notes

1. *Sustainability initiatives* refer to the deliberate actions and policies implemented by a company to minimize its environmental impact, promote social responsibility, and ensure long-term economic viability. By integrating sustainability into their core business strategies, companies aim to align their operations with broader environmental and social goals while enhancing their reputations, reducing risks, and driving innovation.
2. *Sustainability marketing* refers to the strategic promotion of products, services, or practices that emphasize environmental responsibility, social equity, and long-term ecological balance. It involves communicating a company's commitment to sustainable practices.

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## Notes on contributors

**Saara Julkunen** is Professor of International Sales and Head of the Business School at the University of Eastern Finland. Her research expertise lies in international sales management, retailing, customer-seller relationships, and networking strategies for international new ventures. Dr. Julkunen has published extensively in leading academic journals and edited volumes, including the Journal of Service Research, Industrial Marketing Management, International Marketing Review, European Journal of Management, and the Handbook of Research on International Entrepreneurship Strategy.

**Jonna Koponen** is Professor of Marketing and Academy Research Fellow at University of Eastern Finland. Her research focuses on e-leadership and digital communication, digital transformation and sales management, communication competence and the role of AI in leadership. She has over 110 research publications including peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, books, conference papers, and blog texts. She has published her research for example in Journal of Service Research, Industrial Marketing Management, European Journal of Marketing, International Marketing Review, and Information Technology and People.

**Vilma Luostarinen** is an emerging researcher at the UEF Business School, University of Eastern Finland. Her research explores cross-cultural sustainability and cross-cultural marketing initiatives within the business context.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1:

#### Interview questions

- (1) Describe the sustainability marketing of your shopping center.
- (2) Describe the importance of sustainability issues to your team.
- (3) Describe the importance of sustainability issues to your customers.
- (4) Do you have any sustainability marketing campaigns of your own in addition to the global marketing campaigns? What are they?
- (5) How would you describe the sustainability marketing efforts of your shopping center compared to those of your competitors?
- (6) Are there any government regulations or laws that affect your sustainability actions? What are they?
- (7) What does sustainability mean in your field of work?
- (8) With regard to global sustainability campaigns, do you have to adapt them for your consumers, or do you use standardized models? How do you adapt them and to what extent?
- (9) Could you provide a few examples of sustainability campaigns that you have implemented?
- (10) How is sustainability marketing evident in your shopping center, in your social media, on your website, etc.?
- (11) Have you held any events on sustainability in your shopping center? What were they?

### Appendix 2:

#### Interviewees

Russia/Interviewee 1  
Russia/Interviewee 2  
China/Interviewee 1  
China/Interviewee 2  
Poland/Interviewee 1  
Poland/Interviewee 2  
Italy/Interviewee 1  
Italy/Interviewee 2  
Spain/Interviewee 1  
Portugal/Interviewee 1  
Finland/Interviewee 1  
Sweden/Interviewee 1  
Global leader/Interviewee