INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS

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DESIGNING RESPONSIBILITY: HOW SUSTAINABLE MANUFACTURING SHAPES CORPORATE BRAND IDENTITY IN MULTINATIONAL ENTERPRISES

In today's global economy, sustainability is no longer an optional feature of corporate operations but a central pillar of strategic identity and stakeholder legitimacy. For multinational enterprises (MNEs), corporate brand identity (CBI) has become inseparable from how companies manage their environmental and social responsibilities across diverse geographical environments. As environmental concerns constantly grow and stakeholders demand transparency, businesses involved in the industries with high resource consumption and waste generation fell under special scrutiny. One of such fields is design and manufacturing industry, particularly those with visible international operations such as exhibitions and events. Companies operating in this field face growing pressure to integrate sustainability into both production processes and brand matters. The present thesis examines how sustainability-oriented design and manufacturing practices not only mitigate environmental and social risks but also reinforce CBI in MNEs operating across global markets.

Theoretical Framework and Brand Identity Alignment. CBI reflects the distinctive values, culture, and visual identity that define a company in the eyes of stakeholders [1, 2]. Traditionally focused on visual design and communication, CBI has evolved to incorporate the core, purpose-driven elements, such as ethical sourcing, environmental stewardship, and inclusive labor practices. Hatch and Schultz (2008) [3] argue that authentic brand identity emerges from alignment between organizational culture, stakeholder image, and strategic vision. In

sustainability-driven markets, this alignment is increasingly shaped by how companies implement their environmental and social responsibility.

Theoretical frameworks such as stakeholder theory [4] and institutional theory [5] provide useful lenses for understanding this phenomenon. Stakeholder theory emphasizes the importance of responding to the expectations of customers, employees, regulators, and the public. Institutional theory highlights how companies adopt socially legitimized practices to gain acceptance across markets. When MNEs integrate sustainability into brand identity, they do more than enhance reputation – they conform to evolving global norms while differentiating themselves through innovation and responsibility [6].

Design and manufacturing play a pivotal role in this transformation. Global exhibitions, which are major arenas for MNE participation and visibility, provide a clear example of how unsustainable practices: from excessive material usage to single-use constructions and international logistics, create reputational and ecological risks. However, they also offer opportunities for innovation. Companies like Aluvision, a globally recognized provider of modular aluminum exhibition systems, illustrate how sustainability can be integrated into the value chain to support both operational efficiency and brand differentiation. Aluvision's systems are designed for reuse, modularity, and recyclability, helping reduce waste and emissions while offering creative flexibility [7]. By adopting such systems, MNEs participating in exhibitions can align their physical presence with their sustainability commitments, reinforcing their brand identity in front of global stakeholders.

CSR Challenges in Global Design and Manufacturing. From an environmental perspective, the most pressing issues in design and manufacturing include resource consumption, material waste, energy usage, and chemical safety. Modular systems, recyclable materials, and locally sourced inputs reduce waste and carbon emissions, while technologies such as smart software that optimizes internal operations, in-house nitrogen generation for laser-cutting machinery, not only improve operational efficiency and reduce wastage, but also lower emissions associated with transport. Moreover, prioritizing local suppliers where possible also reduces the carbon footprint from transportation, as well as supports regional economies.

In general, an often overlooked but critical factor in this process is the creation of a network of sustainability-driven partners, such as suppliers, contractors, and service providers. Sharing the same environmental and ethical standards can significantly improve the overall sustainability

performance of an MNE (Hatch and Schultz, 2008). Such network would support various stages of manufacturing process, from raw materials to production, and from installation to dismantling.

At the same time, talking of the manufacturing matters, we should not forget that the possibility of sustainable practices in this field starts from the very inception of the item being manufactured; more specifically, it is determined by its design. Sustainable design is a technical, strategic, and symbolic tool. It should adopt a holistic approach that considers the full life-circle of a product or structure, from material sourcing to end-of-life disposal. Some of the key elements of sustainable design include the use of recycled or recyclable materials, provision for energy-efficient production process, reduction of harmful chemicals, and the creation of adaptable, modular components that allow for reuse and reconfiguration as well as possible maintenance services. Furthermore, sustainable design principles promote aesthetic integration with the surrounding environment and prioritize user well-being, accessibility, and inclusivity. When MNEs adopt such principles, they not only reduce their ecological footprint, but also communicate responsible brand ethos that communicates forward-thinking and resonates with global stakeholders.

Social sustainability is equally integral to CBI, especially in labor-intensive industries with diverse global supply chains. Fair labor practices, occupational safety, and diversity initiatives contribute to a strong internal culture and positive external reputation. For example, companies in the exhibition industry are increasingly expected to uphold labor standards across temporary build crews, installation teams, and partner networks, ensuring fair treatment regardless of region. Moreover, inclusive design, such as creating accessible exhibition spaces and signage, further demonstrates a commitment to social responsibility. These practices allow MNEs to extend their brand values into both internal operations and client-facing environments.

However, the risk of greenwashing remains a critical concern. As MNEs promote their sustainability credentials, they must ensure that brand communications are substantiated and validated by actual practices. Authenticity, transparency, and third-party certifications are vital in maintaining stakeholder trust. The alignment between what a company says and what it does becomes the foundation of credible CBI.

Conclusion. To sum up, sustainable manufacturing is no longer a backstage function, it is a brand-defining feature. For MNEs operating in high-impact sectors such as global exhibitions and commercial design, integrating sustainability into operations and identity creates competitive

advantage, fosters stakeholder trust, and aligns with the global shift toward responsible capitalism. As the example of Aluvision illustrates, responsible production, modular innovation, and strategic communication can collectively shape a corporate brand identity that is not only recognized but respected.

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