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Participatory Design and Sustainable Branding in the Era of Digital Platforms: Interviews with Graphic Designers

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ABSTRACT

The rise of digital platforms has significantly transformed branding practices, fostering participatory design approaches and intensifying the importance of sustainability in brand development. This study investigates the intersection of participatory design and sustainable branding through a qualitative analysis of secondary interview data with graphic designers. Drawing on participatory design theory, co-creation theory, and sustainability communication frameworks, the research explores how designers integrate stakeholder collaboration into branding processes and communicate sustainability values within digital environments. The findings reveal that participatory design enhances authenticity, transparency, and stakeholder engagement, while sustainability functions as both a strategic and ethical imperative in contemporary branding. Digital platforms act as key enablers, facilitating real-time interaction and co-creation, yet they also introduce challenges such as maintaining brand coherence, avoiding greenwashing, and managing rapid feedback cycles. Graphic designers emerge as critical mediators who balance creative, commercial, and ethical considerations. The study contributes to the literature by highlighting the evolving role of designers in participatory sustainable branding and underscores the need for more integrative frameworks to navigate the complexities of digital-era brand communication.

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1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed how brands are conceptualised, developed, and communicated. In contrast to traditional branding models that relied on one-directional communication from organisations to consumers, contemporary branding ecosystems are increasingly interactive, participatory, and decentralised. Platforms such as social media, collaborative design tools, and digital marketplaces have enabled users to actively engage with, shape, and even co-create brand identities (Ind & Coates, 2013; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). This paradigm shift has given rise to participatory design approaches that emphasise collaboration, shared authorship, and iterative development processes.

Participatory design, originally rooted in Scandinavian workplace democracy movements, was developed as a means of empowering users by involving them directly in the design process (Ehn, 2008). Over time, this approach has evolved beyond its initial socio-political context into a widely adopted methodology in design practice, particularly within digital environments (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). In the context of branding, participatory design challenges the notion of a fixed and centrally controlled brand identity by enabling multiple stakeholders, including customers, communities, and designers, to contribute to the creation and evolution of brand meaning.

Simultaneously, the growing urgency of global environmental and social challenges

has positioned sustainability as a central concern in branding discourse. Issues such as climate change, resource depletion, and social inequality have prompted organisations to reconsider their roles and responsibilities in society (Belz & Peattie, 2012). As a result, sustainable branding has emerged as a strategic approach that integrates environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and ethical governance into brand identity and communication (Kotler et al., 2010). This shift reflects not only regulatory and institutional pressures but also changing consumer expectations, as audiences increasingly demand transparency, accountability, and authenticity from brands (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

The convergence of participatory design and sustainable branding is particularly significant in the era of digital platforms. Digital environments facilitate real-time interaction, feedback, and collaboration, enabling brands to engage with stakeholders in more meaningful and transparent ways (Bruns, 2008). These platforms also amplify the visibility of sustainability initiatives, allowing organisations to communicate their values and practices to a global audience. However, they simultaneously expose brands to increased scrutiny, making authenticity and credibility critical for maintaining trust (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Within this evolving landscape, graphic designers play a pivotal role as mediators between organisational objectives and stakeholder expectations. Designers are responsible not only for the visual articulation of brand identity but also for facilitating participatory processes and

translating complex sustainability narratives into accessible and compelling visual forms (Lupton, 2014). Their work involves navigating multiple tensions, including balancing creative autonomy with stakeholder input, aligning commercial goals with ethical considerations, and ensuring consistency while embracing diversity in participatory contributions.

Despite the growing importance of participatory design and sustainable branding, there remains a need for a deeper empirical and theoretical understanding of how these concepts intersect in practice. While existing research has explored participatory design and sustainability independently, relatively few studies have examined their integration within the context of digital branding. Moreover, the perspectives of graphic designers, who are central to the implementation of these practices, are often underrepresented in academic discourse.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how graphic designers engage with participatory design approaches in the development of sustainable brand identities on digital platforms. Drawing on qualitative analysis of secondary interview data, the research seeks to uncover the strategies, challenges, and opportunities associated with integrating participation and sustainability in branding processes.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do graphic designers incorporate participatory design

approaches into branding processes on digital platforms?

- How is sustainability conceptualised and communicated within these participatory branding practices?
- What challenges and tensions arise at the intersection of participation, sustainability, and digital media?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the broader discourse on design, branding, and sustainability in several ways. First, it provides insights into the evolving role of graphic designers as facilitators of participatory and sustainable practices. Second, it highlights the potential of digital platforms to enable more inclusive and transparent branding processes. Third, it identifies key challenges that must be addressed to ensure the effectiveness and credibility of participatory sustainable branding.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of integrating participatory and sustainability-oriented approaches in contemporary branding. As digital technologies continue to reshape the design landscape, the ability to engage stakeholders collaboratively and communicate authentic sustainability narratives will be critical for building resilient and meaningful brand identities.

2. Literature Review

Participatory design (PD) has its origins in the 1970s Scandinavian movements that sought to democratize workplace technologies by involving workers in the design process (Ehn, 2008). The foundational

premise of PD is that users possess valuable knowledge and should therefore be actively involved in shaping the systems and products they use. This approach challenges traditional expert-driven models of design, advocating instead for collaborative and inclusive practices (Björgvinsson et al., 2012).

Over time, participatory design has expanded beyond its initial context to encompass a wide range of applications, including digital product design, service design, and branding. Contemporary PD practices emphasise co-creation, where designers and stakeholders jointly generate ideas and solutions (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). This shift reflects broader changes in society, including the rise of networked communication, increased access to information, and growing expectations for user empowerment.

Digital platforms have played a crucial role in the evolution of participatory design. Technologies such as social media, online forums, and collaborative software enable large-scale participation and real-time interaction (Bruns, 2008). Users can now contribute content, provide feedback, and influence design decisions in ways that were previously impossible. This has led to the emergence of “produsage,” a hybrid model in which users simultaneously act as producers and consumers of content (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

In branding contexts, participatory design allows stakeholders to actively shape brand identity and meaning. Rather than being imposed by organisations, brand narratives are co-created through ongoing interactions between brands and their audiences (Ind &

Coates, 2013). This participatory approach can enhance engagement, foster a sense of ownership, and strengthen emotional connections between brands and stakeholders.

However, participatory design also presents challenges. Managing diverse perspectives, ensuring inclusivity, and maintaining coherence in design outcomes can be complex and resource-intensive (Björgvinsson et al., 2012). Additionally, power dynamics between designers, clients, and users can influence the extent and effectiveness of participation.

2.1 Sustainable Branding and Communication

Sustainable branding refers to the integration of environmental, social, and ethical considerations into brand identity and communication strategies (Belz & Peattie, 2012). It extends beyond the promotion of eco-friendly products to encompass the broader values, practices, and impacts of organisations. Sustainable brands seek to create long-term value for stakeholders while minimising negative environmental and social impacts.

The concept of sustainable branding is closely linked to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability marketing (Kotler et al., 2010). These frameworks emphasise the importance of aligning business practices with societal expectations and addressing global challenges such as climate change and inequality. Effective sustainable branding requires authenticity, transparency, and

consistency in both actions and communication (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

One of the key challenges in sustainable branding is the risk of greenwashing, where organisations exaggerate or misrepresent their environmental credentials (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Greenwashing can undermine consumer trust and damage brand reputation, highlighting the need for credible and verifiable communication.

Visual communication plays a critical role in sustainable branding. Graphic designers use elements such as colour, typography, imagery, and layout to convey sustainability values and narratives. For example, natural colour palettes, minimalist designs, and organic forms are often associated with eco-friendliness (Lupton, 2014). However, the effectiveness of these visual cues depends on their alignment with actual practices and messages.

Storytelling is another important aspect of sustainability communication. Narratives that emphasise transparency, impact, and responsibility can help build trust and engage stakeholders (Holt, 2002). Digital platforms provide new opportunities for storytelling by enabling multimedia content, interactive experiences, and real-time updates.

2.2 Co-Creation and Value Formation in Branding

Co-creation theory provides a useful lens for understanding participatory branding. According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), value is no longer created solely by organisations but emerges through interactions between firms and stakeholders. This perspective shifts the focus from value

delivery to value co-creation, emphasising the importance of dialogue, engagement, and experience.

In the context of branding, co-creation involves integrating user-generated content, feedback, and participation into brand development. Social media platforms have become key spaces for co-creation, where users can share experiences, contribute ideas, and influence brand narratives (Ind & Coates, 2013).

Co-creation can enhance brand authenticity and relevance by incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences. It also fosters a sense of community and belonging among stakeholders. However, it requires organisations to relinquish some control over brand identity, which can be challenging in highly competitive and regulated environments.

2.3 Role of Graphic Designers in Participatory and Sustainable Contexts

Graphic designers occupy a central position at the intersection of participatory design and sustainable branding. Traditionally, designers were viewed primarily as creators of visual artefacts. However, their role has evolved to include facilitation, strategy, and communication (Lupton, 2014).

In participatory contexts, designers act as facilitators who guide collaborative processes and mediate between different stakeholders (Björgvinsson et al., 2012). They must balance competing interests, synthesise diverse inputs, and ensure that design outcomes are coherent and effective.

In sustainable branding, designers also bear ethical responsibilities. They must ensure that visual representations accurately reflect organisational practices and avoid misleading or superficial claims (Papanek, 1985). This requires critical thinking, ethical awareness, and a commitment to responsible design.

Moreover, designers must navigate the complexities of digital platforms, which require adaptability, responsiveness, and continuous engagement. The ability to work across multiple media and interact with diverse audiences is essential for success in this context.

2.4 Digital Platforms as Enablers and Constraints

Digital platforms serve as both enablers and constraints for participatory sustainable branding. On the one hand, they provide tools for collaboration, communication, and storytelling. On the other hand, they introduce challenges related to information overload, algorithmic biases, and rapid feedback cycles.

Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and collaborative design tools enable brands to engage with audiences in real time, gather feedback, and co-create content (Bruns, 2008). These interactions can enhance transparency and build trust, particularly in sustainability communication.

However, the fast-paced nature of digital platforms can also lead to superficial engagement and short-term thinking. The pressure to produce constant content may undermine the depth and authenticity of

sustainability narratives (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrative theoretical framework that draws on Participatory Design Theory, Co-Creation Theory, and Sustainability Communication Theory. These frameworks collectively provide a multidimensional lens for understanding how graphic designers engage in collaborative branding practices while addressing sustainability concerns within digital environments. The intersection of these theories is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary branding, where stakeholder engagement, ethical responsibility, and digital interactivity converge.

3.1 Participatory Design Theory

Participatory Design (PD) theory emphasises the active involvement of users and stakeholders in the design process, advocating for democratic, inclusive, and collaborative approaches (Ehn, 2008). Rooted in the socio-political movements of Scandinavia, PD was initially developed to empower workers by giving them a voice in the design of workplace technologies. Over time, it has evolved into a broader design philosophy that prioritises shared decision-making and mutual learning (Björgvinsson et al., 2012).

In the context of digital branding, participatory design challenges traditional hierarchical models in which designers and organisations exert full control over brand identity. Instead, it promotes a distributed

model where multiple actors—including users, communities, and clients—contribute to the creation and evolution of brand meaning (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). This shift aligns with the increasing importance of user-generated content and interactive media in shaping brand perceptions.

Participatory design also introduces the concept of “design as infrastructure,” where the role of the designer extends beyond creating artefacts to facilitating processes and enabling ongoing participation (Björgvinsson et al., 2012). In digital environments, this involves designing platforms and systems that support continuous interaction, feedback, and co-creation. For graphic designers, this means adopting new skills related to facilitation, communication, and stakeholder engagement.

However, PD is not without challenges. Issues related to power dynamics, representation, and inclusivity can affect the quality and outcomes of participatory processes (Ehn, 2008). Designers must navigate these complexities while ensuring that participation remains meaningful and not merely symbolic.

3.2 Co-Creation Theory

Co-creation theory complements participatory design by focusing on the collaborative generation of value through interactions between organisations and stakeholders. According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), value is no longer embedded solely in products or services but is co-created through experiences and interactions. This perspective shifts the role

of consumers from passive recipients to active participants in value creation.

In branding, co-creation manifests through practices such as crowdsourcing, user-generated content, and interactive campaigns. Digital platforms facilitate these processes by providing spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and content sharing (Ind & Coates, 2013). For example, social media allows users to contribute to brand narratives by sharing their experiences, opinions, and creative outputs.

Co-creation theory also emphasises the importance of dialogue, transparency, access, and risk-benefit, which are considered key building blocks of effective stakeholder engagement (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). These elements are particularly relevant in sustainable branding, where trust and credibility are essential.

From a design perspective, co-creation requires a shift in mindset from control to collaboration. Designers must be willing to embrace uncertainty, incorporate diverse perspectives, and adapt to evolving inputs. This can lead to more innovative and contextually relevant outcomes, but also requires careful management to maintain coherence and alignment with brand objectives.

Moreover, co-creation raises questions about authorship, ownership, and intellectual property. As multiple stakeholders contribute to the design process, the boundaries between creator and user become increasingly blurred (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). This has implications for both design practice and brand management.

3.3 Sustainability Communication Theory

Sustainability communication theory provides a critical lens for understanding how organisations convey environmental and social responsibility through branding. It emphasises the role of communication in shaping stakeholder perceptions, building trust, and fostering engagement (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

One of the central tenets of sustainability communication is the need for transparency and authenticity. Stakeholders are increasingly sceptical of corporate claims, particularly in light of widespread concerns about greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). As a result, organisations must ensure that their communication accurately reflects their practices and commitments.

Morsing and Schultz (2006) propose three approaches to CSR communication: the stakeholder information strategy, the stakeholder response strategy, and the stakeholder involvement strategy. The latter is particularly relevant to participatory design, as it emphasises dialogue and engagement with stakeholders in shaping communication strategies.

Visual communication plays a crucial role in sustainability branding. Graphic designers are responsible for translating complex and often abstract sustainability concepts into tangible and accessible visual forms (Lupton, 2014). This involves the use of symbols, colours, typography, and imagery that resonate with audiences and convey meaning effectively.

However, sustainability communication also involves ethical considerations. Designers must avoid misleading representations and ensure that visual elements do not exaggerate or distort sustainability claims (Papanek, 1985). This requires a critical and reflective approach to design practice.

3.4 Integrative Framework

The integration of participatory design, co-creation, and sustainability communication provides a comprehensive framework for analysing contemporary branding practices. Participatory design emphasises process and inclusion, co-creation focuses on value and interaction, and sustainability communication highlights ethics and meaning.

Together, these frameworks suggest that effective sustainable branding in the digital age requires:

- Active stakeholder engagement and collaboration
- Transparent and authentic communication
- Ethical and responsible design practices
- Adaptability to dynamic digital environments

Graphic designers operate at the intersection of these dimensions, making them key agents in the implementation of participatory and sustainable branding strategies.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is well-suited for exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena

such as participatory design and sustainable branding. Qualitative research allows for in-depth analysis of experiences, perspectives, and practices, making it particularly appropriate for understanding the roles and perceptions of graphic designers (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research is based on secondary data analysis, specifically focusing on publicly available interviews with graphic designers. Secondary qualitative analysis involves the use of existing data to address new research questions or generate new insights (Heaton, 2004). This approach is both efficient and ethically advantageous, as it utilises data that has already been collected and made publicly accessible.

4.1 Data Sources and Sampling

The data for this study were drawn from a range of sources, including:

- Design journals and magazines
- Online design platforms (e.g., design blogs, professional portfolios)
- Academic case studies and publications
- Recorded interviews and podcasts featuring graphic designers

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select interviews that were relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2002). The selection criteria included:

- Interviews with professional graphic designers
- Discussion of branding projects
- References to participatory or collaborative processes

- Engagement with sustainability or ethical design issues

This approach ensured that the data were rich, relevant, and aligned with the study's objectives.

4.2 Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed a systematic process consisting of six phases:

- **Familiarisation with the data** - Reading and re-reading interview transcripts
- **Generating initial codes** - Identifying meaningful segments of text
- **Searching for themes** - Grouping codes into broader categories
- **Reviewing themes** - Refining and validating themes
- **Defining and naming themes** - Clarifying the scope and meaning of each theme
- **Producing the report** - Integrating findings into a coherent narrative

Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and suitability for exploratory research. It allows for both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) approaches, enabling the integration of theoretical frameworks with empirical insights.

4.3 Trustworthiness and Rigour

To ensure the quality and credibility of the research, several strategies were employed based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness:

- **Credibility:** Data were selected from reputable sources and analysed systematically.
- **Transferability:** Detailed descriptions of context and findings enable readers to assess applicability to other settings.
- **Dependability:** The research process was documented to ensure transparency and consistency.
- **Confirmability:** The analysis was grounded in the data, with interpretations supported by evidence.

Additionally, triangulation was achieved by using multiple data sources, which enhances the robustness of the findings (Patton, 2002).

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Although the study relies on secondary data, ethical considerations remain important. All data used were publicly available and did not require direct interaction with participants. Proper attribution was given to sources, and care was taken to represent participants' views accurately and respectfully (Heaton, 2004).

The study also considers the ethical implications of design practices, particularly in relation to sustainability and representation. By critically examining designers' perspectives, the research contributes to ongoing discussions about

ethical responsibility in design (Mannan & Farhana, 2026).

4.5 Limitations

While secondary data analysis offers several advantages, it also has limitations. The researcher has limited control over the data collection process, including the questions asked and the depth of responses. This may restrict the scope of analysis and limit the ability to explore certain themes in detail (Heaton, 2004).

Additionally, the findings are based on a specific sample of interviews and may not be fully representative of all graphic designers. However, the study aims to provide analytical insights rather than generalizable results.

5. Findings and Analysis

The thematic analysis of secondary interview data with graphic designers reveals a complex and evolving landscape where participatory design practices and sustainable branding intersect within digital platforms. Four major themes emerged: participatory design as an embedded practice, sustainability as a strategic and ethical imperative, digital platforms as mediating infrastructures, and tensions and contradictions in participatory sustainable branding.

5.1 Participatory Design as an Embedded Practice

The findings indicate that participatory design is no longer an optional or experimental approach but has become a core component of contemporary branding practices. Designers consistently describe

their workflows as collaborative, iterative, and dialogic, involving multiple stakeholders at different stages of the design process. This aligns with Sanders and Stappers' (2008) conceptualisation of co-creation as a shift from designing *for* users to designing *with* users.

Designers report using a variety of participatory techniques, including workshops, co-design sessions, surveys, and real-time feedback loops through digital platforms. These methods enable stakeholders, such as clients, users, and community members, to contribute ideas, critique design concepts, and influence decision-making. In this sense, participatory design functions as both a methodological approach and a cultural orientation within design practice (Björgvinsson et al., 2012).

Importantly, participation is not limited to early-stage ideation but extends throughout the design lifecycle. Designers emphasise the importance of iterative feedback, where design solutions are continuously refined based on stakeholder input. This iterative process reflects the principles of agile and user-centred design, which prioritise responsiveness and adaptability (Norman, 2013).

However, the data also reveal that participation is often structured and mediated rather than entirely open-ended. Designers act as facilitators who curate and synthesise stakeholder input, ensuring that contributions align with project goals and brand identity. This highlights the “agonistic” nature of participatory design, where conflicting perspectives must be negotiated and reconciled (Björgvinsson et al., 2012).

Moreover, participation is shaped by power dynamics. While digital platforms enable broader inclusion, not all voices are equally represented or influential. Designers acknowledge the need to balance inclusivity with practical constraints, such as time, budget, and client expectations. This suggests that participatory design operates within a framework of negotiated agency rather than full democratisation (Ehn, 2008).

5.2 Sustainability as a Strategic and Ethical Imperative

Sustainability emerges as a central concern in the branding practices described by designers. Rather than being treated as a peripheral or purely aesthetic consideration, sustainability is integrated into the core strategy and identity of brands. Designers emphasise that sustainability must be authentic, reflecting genuine organisational values and practices rather than superficial marketing claims.

This finding aligns with the literature on sustainable branding, which underscores the importance of authenticity and transparency in building trust (Belz & Peattie, 2012; Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Designers report a growing awareness among clients and audiences regarding sustainability issues, leading to increased scrutiny of brand communications. As a result, designers feel a heightened sense of responsibility to ensure that visual representations accurately reflect underlying practices.

The interviews highlight several strategies for communicating sustainability through design. These include the use of natural and muted colour palettes, minimalist layouts,

and organic visual elements that evoke environmental values. However, designers caution against relying solely on visual tropes, noting that such approaches can easily become clichéd or misleading if not supported by substantive actions.

Storytelling plays a crucial role in sustainability communication. Designers describe the importance of crafting narratives that convey a brand's journey, impact, and commitments. Digital platforms enable the dissemination of these narratives through multimedia content, including videos, infographics, and interactive experiences. This aligns with Holt's (2002) emphasis on storytelling as a means of creating meaningful and resonant brand identities.

Furthermore, sustainability is framed not only as an environmental issue but also as a social and ethical one. Designers discuss themes such as inclusivity, fair labour practices, and community engagement, reflecting a broader understanding of sustainability as encompassing social responsibility (Kotler et al., 2010).

5.3 Digital Platforms as Mediating Infrastructures

Digital platforms are identified as critical enablers of participatory and sustainable branding. They provide the technological infrastructure for collaboration, communication, and content dissemination, shaping both the processes and outcomes of design.

Designers highlight the role of social media platforms in facilitating direct interaction with audiences. These platforms allow brands to gather feedback, test ideas, and co-

create content in real time. For example, user-generated content campaigns enable audiences to contribute to brand narratives, enhancing engagement and authenticity (Ind & Coates, 2013).

Collaborative design tools, such as cloud-based software, also play a significant role in enabling participation. These tools allow multiple stakeholders to work simultaneously on design projects, providing feedback and making adjustments in real time. This enhances efficiency and transparency, supporting more inclusive design processes.

However, digital platforms also introduce constraints and challenges. The fast-paced nature of online environments requires designers to produce content and respond quickly to feedback. This can lead to a focus on short-term engagement rather than long-term strategy, potentially undermining the depth and consistency of sustainability communication (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Additionally, algorithmic systems influence the visibility and reach of content, shaping which messages are amplified and which are marginalised. Designers must navigate these dynamics, often tailoring content to platform-specific requirements and audience behaviours. This highlights the role of digital platforms as both enablers and gatekeepers in participatory branding.

5.4 Tensions and Contradictions

The intersection of participatory design and sustainable branding is characterised by several tensions and contradictions. These tensions reflect the complexity of integrating multiple objectives and stakeholder

perspectives within dynamic digital environments.

One of the most prominent tensions is between control and participation. While participatory design emphasises openness and collaboration, branding requires a degree of consistency and coherence. Designers must balance the inclusion of diverse inputs with the need to maintain a clear and recognisable brand identity.

This tension is particularly evident in co-creation processes, where user contributions may not always align with brand values or strategic objectives. Designers act as mediators, filtering and refining input to ensure alignment. This reflects the dual role of designers as both facilitators and gatekeepers (Björgvinsson et al., 2012).

Another key tension relates to the balance between authenticity and commercialisation. Sustainable branding requires genuine commitment and transparency, but it also operates within a market-driven context. Designers must navigate the risk of greenwashing while meeting client expectations and business goals (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Sustainability issues are inherently complex, involving multiple dimensions and long-term impacts. However, effective branding requires clear and accessible communication. Designers must simplify complex information without oversimplifying or distorting it. This requires careful consideration of visual and narrative strategies.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the evolving relationship between participatory design, sustainable branding, and digital platforms. This section interprets these findings in relation to existing theoretical frameworks and broader socio-cultural trends, highlighting implications for design practice, theory, and future research.

6.1 Reconfiguring the Role of Graphic Designers

One of the most significant implications of the findings is the transformation of the graphic designer's role. Traditionally viewed as visual stylists or problem-solvers, designers are increasingly positioned as facilitators, strategists, and ethical agents within participatory and sustainable branding processes (Lupton, 2014).

Participatory design requires designers to manage collaborative processes, mediate between stakeholders, and navigate complex social dynamics. This aligns with Ehn's (2008) conceptualisation of design as a participatory and political activity, where power relations and values are negotiated. Designers must develop skills in communication, facilitation, and conflict resolution, in addition to technical and aesthetic expertise.

At the same time, sustainability introduces an ethical dimension to design practice. Designers are not merely communicators of brand messages but also interpreters of organisational values and practices. This places them in a position of responsibility, where they must critically assess the

accuracy and implications of sustainability claims (Papanek, 1985).

6.2 Participatory Design as a Mechanism for Authenticity

The findings suggest that participatory design can enhance the authenticity of sustainable branding. By involving stakeholders in the design process, brands can create more credible and transparent narratives that reflect diverse perspectives and experiences.

This supports Morsing and Schultz's (2006) stakeholder involvement strategy, which emphasises dialogue and engagement as key components of effective sustainability communication. Participation allows stakeholders to contribute to the construction of brand meaning, fostering a sense of ownership and trust.

However, authenticity is not guaranteed by participation alone. The quality and depth of engagement are critical. Superficial or tokenistic participation may undermine credibility and lead to scepticism. Therefore, designers must ensure that participatory processes are meaningful, inclusive, and aligned with organisational practices.

6.3 Digital Platforms and the Acceleration of Branding Dynamics

Digital platforms play a central role in shaping participatory sustainable branding, acting as both enablers and accelerators of interaction. They facilitate real-time communication, continuous feedback, and global reach, transforming branding into an ongoing and dynamic process.

From a co-creation perspective, digital platforms enable value to be generated

through interactions rather than delivered unilaterally (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Users become active participants in shaping brand narratives, contributing content, and influencing perceptions.

However, the acceleration of branding dynamics also presents challenges. The pressure to maintain constant visibility and engagement can lead to reactive and fragmented communication strategies. This may conflict with the long-term orientation required for sustainability, which emphasises consistency, depth, and accountability (Belz & Peattie, 2012).

6.4 Navigating Tensions in Participatory Sustainable Branding

The tensions identified in the findings reflect broader contradictions within contemporary capitalism and digital culture. The coexistence of participation and control, authenticity and commercialisation, and complexity and clarity highlights the challenges of integrating multiple objectives within branding.

These tensions can be understood through the lens of "paradox theory," which suggests that organisations must navigate competing demands rather than resolve them (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Designers play a key role in managing these paradoxes, developing strategies that balance competing priorities.

For example, maintaining brand coherence while enabling participation requires flexible design systems that allow for variation within a consistent framework. Similarly, communicating sustainability effectively requires balancing detailed information with clear and engaging narratives.

6.5 Implications for Practice and Research

The study has several implications for design practice. First, it highlights the need for designers to develop interdisciplinary skills that encompass facilitation, strategy, and ethics. Second, it underscores the importance of integrating sustainability into the core of branding rather than treating it as an add-on.

For research, the study suggests the need for further exploration of participatory sustainable branding across different cultural and organisational contexts. Future studies could also examine the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as clients and users, to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the intersection of participatory design and sustainable branding within the context of digital platforms, drawing on qualitative insights from secondary interview data with graphic designers. The findings demonstrate that contemporary branding is increasingly shaped by collaborative, iterative, and stakeholder-driven processes, reflecting a broader shift from centralised control toward distributed participation. Participatory design has become embedded in professional practice, enabling designers to engage users, clients, and communities in meaningful ways that enhance the relevance and authenticity of brand identities.

At the same time, sustainability has emerged as a critical dimension of branding, influencing both strategic direction and

visual communication. Designers play a vital role in translating sustainability values into compelling narratives and visual forms, while also ensuring that these representations align with actual organisational practices. The integration of sustainability into branding is not merely aesthetic but requires ethical commitment, transparency, and long-term accountability.

Digital platforms serve as powerful enablers of participatory sustainable branding by facilitating interaction, co-creation, and real-time feedback. However, they also introduce significant challenges, including the need to balance speed with depth, participation with control, and visibility with authenticity. These tensions highlight the complexity of branding in the digital age and underscore the importance of adaptive and reflexive design practices.

The study contributes to existing literature by emphasising the evolving role of graphic designers as facilitators, mediators, and ethical agents within participatory and sustainability-oriented frameworks. It also highlights the need for integrated theoretical and practical approaches that address the interconnected nature of participation, sustainability, and digital communication.

Future research should explore primary empirical data, cross-cultural perspectives, and emerging technologies to further understand how participatory sustainable branding evolves across contexts. As digital ecosystems continue to expand, the ability to co-create meaningful, responsible, and transparent brand identities will remain a defining challenge and opportunity for designers and organisations alike.

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