

AI-driven sustainability brand activism for family businesses: a future-proofing perspective article

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Abstract

Purpose – Artificial intelligence (AI) and sustainable business represent the irrefutable future of all forward looking businesses in the world today. In this perspective article, the authors explore the confluence of these important topics by highlighting the role of family businesses in advancing sustainable brand activism aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), like SDG 1, which emphasises poverty eradication. The authors fall on the transformative potential of artificial intelligence (AI) and online brand communities in family businesses as an anchor for promoting sustainability practices that align with UNSDGs.

Design/methodology/approach – Using literature review, the authors fall on the transformative potential of AI and online brand communities in family businesses as an anchor for promoting sustainability practices that align with UNSDGs.

Findings – Scholarly research on AI-driven sustainability brand activism in family businesses is either limited or nonexistent. Family businesses have a unique opportunity to use AI for eco-friendly operations, personalised brand engagement, eco-friendly product development, global collaborations and education and advocacy in support of the UNSDGs. Future research could look at how family businesses align their values, their long-term effects, how they work across generations, how resilient and flexible they are and how they compare to non-family businesses when it comes to using AI and brand activism as long-term strategies for sustainability and survival.

Originality/value – The authors call for family businesses, governments and stakeholders to take theoretical and practical actions in promoting AI-driven sustainability brand activism aligned with the UNSDGs. It underscores the distinctive role of family businesses in driving sustainability and fostering brand activism through AI in a digital age.

Keywords Family business, Sustainability, AI, Brand activism

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

In an ever-evolving business landscape where sustainability and brand activism have taken centre stage, family businesses hold a unique position. Their deep-rooted values and community ties provide a solid foundation for championing sustainability initiatives that speak to the UNSDGs. This perspective article explores the transformative potential of integrating artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in family businesses to advance sustainable brand activism through online brand communities. We argue that AI holds the potential to enhance sustainability practices and create meaningful connections between family businesses and sustainability efforts, through online brand communities that can achieve the UNSDGs. The heart of this perspective article lies in the intersection of AI, sustainability, and the brand activism potential of family businesses. It examines how family businesses can leverage AI to gather insights from online brand communities, identify sustainability concerns, and proactively address them. This paper sets the stage for a



transformative discussion that spans the past, present, and future of family businesses' engagement in sustainable brand activism towards the UNSDGs.

Sustainability practices in family businesses

Sustainability practices refer to the deliberate actions, policies and strategies adopted by a firm to minimise their environmental, social and economic impacts while ensuring long-term profitability and viability (Canavati, 2018). Critical aspects of these sustainability strategies in family businesses could be to reduce poverty, promote sustainable food production, foster inclusive workplaces, support women in leadership roles, drive local economic growth and promote responsible consumption and production methods. Studies related to family business sustainability are limited (Canavati, 2018).

Online brand engagement for family businesses

Online brand community creation involves actively connecting with brand audiences through digital channels and platforms, fostering loyalty and driving business growth (Vander-Schee *et al.*, 2020). Key components of online brand engagement include content marketing, online communities, user-generated content, and data analytics, among others. Family business online brand engagement has largely relied on the use of social media (Tiwasong *et al.*, 2022) as a sales lead channel and is nowhere near sustainable activism. We argue that by leveraging digital tools and platforms, family businesses can create meaningful and interactive experiences that resonate with customers and align with their values and objectives that speak to the UN SDGs.

Brand activism strategies for family businesses

Brand activism has gained significant momentum in recent years (Pimentel *et al.*, 2023), as businesses increasingly recognise the importance of aligning their brands with societal and environmental values (Pimentel *et al.*, 2023). A literature search indicates that there has been no study focused on brand activism. The closest studies on brand activism in family business research have been on corporate social performance (Canavati, 2018), good corporate governance (Shanmugasundaram, 2020) and rural community development as a sustainability activity (Le *et al.*, 2022). We posit that the integration of brand activism strategies into family businesses presents a unique opportunity to align their values with sustainability initiatives.

Artificial intelligence in family businesses

AI is the replication of human intelligence in computers that think, learn, and accomplish tasks (Lannon *et al.*, 2023) requiring human involvement. AI in family businesses is a developing field (Lannon *et al.*, 2023), with notable studies exploring its potential as a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) technology (Chaudhuri *et al.*, 2023). We argue that family businesses can leverage AI to drive sustainable brand activism and enhance online brand community engagement, positioning themselves for future success in a digitally evolving landscape.

Past years of research or practice in AI, sustainability, and brand activism

Over the past years, family businesses have faced challenges in integrating AI-driven strategies into their operations, with limited research on AI adoption within firms also focused on the benefits and challenges of AI implementation among non-family businesses

(Lannon *et al.*, 2023). The only notable study on family business in this regard was the potential of AI as a CRM technology (Chaudhuri *et al.*, 2023).

Family businesses have shown resilience and commitment to local communities. However, early forms of sustainability activism (Canavati, 2018) were often localised, lacked the reach and impact of modern brand activism initiatives (Rudeloff and Amin, 2023) and were also largely unrelated to family businesses. Research on modern brand activism initiatives as a concept on its own has primarily focused on large corporations and their initiatives, highlighting the potential benefits of brand activism (Rudeloff and Amin, 2023), evidently absent from family business literature.

Limited studies have explored the use of digital platforms for eco-friendly practices, ethical conduct and community engagement (Singh *et al.*, 2021; Rauf, 2021; Pirraglia *et al.*, 2023), but these findings are derived from non-family businesses. This perspective article offers insights into the future possibilities of using AI as a catalyst for sustainability brand activism in family businesses.

Exploring sustainability, brand activism and AI confluence

As AI technologies continue to advance, family businesses should consider the following suggestions listed in Table 1 for the immense promise of adoption.

These suggestions represent a proactive approach where family businesses, armed with AI technologies, can lead the way in sustainability brand activism. In view of these trajectories of expected industry practices, we point to some research directions below.

Future research on AI, brand activism, and sustainability in family businesses

The literature on brand activism and AI adoption in family businesses is still in its nascent stages. Potential avenues for future research include the following:

Alignment of values: Future research should explore how family businesses integrate brand activism with sustainability values, examining the relationship between these values and brand messaging to gauge their authenticity and effectiveness.

Suggestion	Description
AI-integrated sustainability strategies	Utilise AI to analyse vast datasets, identify sustainable practices, optimise resource usage, and make informed decisions for eco-friendly operations and ethical sourcing
Personalised online engagement	Leverage AI for personalising content and interactions with customers, creating deeper connections, and aligning activism efforts with consumer values and the UNSDGs
AI-enhanced eco-friendly products	Revolutionise eco-friendly product development by using AI to create innovative, sustainable offerings that meet consumer demands and support UN sustainability goals
Global collaborations	Expand globally with AI's help, fostering sustainability partnerships and sharing best practices to amplify sustainability brand activism's impact
Education and advocacy	Harness AI to become sustainability advocates, creating content and establishing thought leadership to educate consumers about sustainable practices
Transparency and trust	Enhance transparency and trust using AI for real-time tracking of sustainability metrics, allowing customer verification and building brand loyalty

Source(s): Authors' own table

Table 1. Suggested family business strategies towards adoption of AI, brand activism and sustainability

Long-term impact: Family businesses have a longer time horizon than non-family firms, making it crucial to study how brand activism initiatives impact society and the business. AI adoption's contribution to brand activism and firm sustainability, in terms of financial performance and environmental and social responsibility, is also emerging. Addressing challenges like organisational culture shifts and resource constraints during AI implementation can offer practical insights into achieving the UNSDGs.

Inter-generational dynamics: Family businesses often involve multiple generations, highlighting the importance of understanding how different generations contribute to AI adoption, sustainability initiatives, and brand activism.

Resilience and adaptation: Brand activism involves addressing controversial issues, therefore, understanding how family businesses adapt and remain resilient is crucial.

Comparison with non-family businesses: Comparative studies between family and non-family businesses that are engaging in sustainability brand activism can shed light on whether family businesses exhibit distinct approaches or outcomes to sustainability.

In summary, future research in family businesses should explore the dynamics of AI-initiated sustainability brand activism by exploring sustainability values, long-term impacts, inter-generational dynamics, resilience and comparison with non-family businesses to comprehensively investigate AI and sustainability in family businesses. These research directions provide a roadmap for future academic investigations into AI, brand activism and sustainability in family businesses.

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