
MARKETING SUSTAINABILITY AS A CORE PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCY. LESSONS FROM AN INTERNATIONAL CAPACITY-BUILDING PROJECT

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Abstract:

This research explores the intersection of three domains: marketing sustainability (as a professional competency), journalism education and international capacity building. The study investigates the mechanisms through which a transformative, student-centered curriculum reform can dismantle traditional rote-learning barriers and foster a sense of global responsibility, framing sustainability as a strategic professional tool rather than just academic content. This study utilizes an instrumental case study design, focusing on a single, cross-border initiative: the Sustainable Development Goals in Journalism Reporting project, involving academic partners from Spain, Romania, Luxembourg, China, Cambodia, and Malaysia. This paper addresses two main research questions: How do interdisciplinary co-creation processes in journalism curricula work to promote the 2030 Agenda? How can this case serve as a blueprint for marketing sustainability in higher education, both in theory and in actual practice?

Keywords: *marketing sustainability, Sustainable Development Goals, capacity-building, journalism curricula, higher education.*

1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future (United Nations, 2015). The core of this initiative is defined by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a critical appeal for global cooperation between developed and emerging nations (United Nations, n.d. - b). This framework recognizes the intersectionality of global challenges, asserting that poverty

alleviation and social equity are inherently linked to economic development. Crucially, these goals mandate that such progress occurs within the bounds of environmental sustainability, specifically through climate mitigation and the conservation of natural habitats (World Bank, n.d.). The agenda is governed by the transformative principle of "Leaving No One Behind," which requires a holistic integration of social equity, environmental protection, and economic viability to ensure that progress reaches the furthest behind first (United Nations, n.d. - a).

The 2030 Agenda requires a new breed of professionals who can communicate complex sustainability data. Sustainability is nowadays a professional requirement. The modern educational landscape, characterized by the urgent need to address the 2030 Agenda, requires a fundamental reassessment of how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) establish authentic connections with global issues and ensure the professional readiness of future communicators. Just as a 20th-century professional had to be "computer literate," a 21st-century professional must be "sustainability literate", meaning being able to market, communicate, and implement the SDGs as a natural part of the daily work.

Defining marketing sustainability as a core professional competency means moving beyond the idea of sustainability as just a topic to be studied. Instead, it is framed as a fundamental set of skills, knowledge and behaviors that every modern professional must possess to be successful and responsible in the current global economy. In this context, "marketing" is not about selling products; it is about the strategic communication of value. Within this context, marketing sustainability is essential in journalism education because it transforms the SDGs from abstract academic topics into a core professional competency: while professional journalism provides the ethical imperative for reporting, marketing supplies the strategic communication tools - such as digital narratives, social media strategy, data visualization and audience segmentation - needed to make complex global issues actionable and relevant for the public.

While there is a burgeoning body of scholarship concerning the SDGs and a separate discourse on media education, a review of current literature reveals an absence of studies that address the interplay between all three topics: marketing sustainability as a core professional competency, the journalism curricula and the framework of SDG-focused capacity building projects. This paper aims to bridge the current literature gap by examining a cross-border initiative: the SDGs Journalism Reporting project (SDGsJR), funded by Erasmus+, Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices / Capacity building in higher education. The project was designed and implemented by a consortium of three academic organizations from Europe (Spain, Romania and Luxembourg) and six from Asia (China, Cambodia, Malaysia) (SDGsJR, 2023).

The paper is organized into six distinct sections. It opens with an introduction to the subject matter, followed by a review of the relevant literature. The third section outlines the research objectives and methodology employed to document the case. In the fourth section, the SDGsJR project is presented in detail. The fifth section explores the project's implications for marketing sustainability, offering recommendations for stakeholders involved in SDG reporting. Finally, the sixth section concludes the paper, addressing the study's constraints and identifying potential areas for further investigation.

2. Literature review

2.1. The transversal evolution of sustainability education

Recent scholarship has evolved from a simple knowledge-transfer model toward a transformative competency framework, repositioning sustainability as a foundational pillar of modern education. As Redman & Wiek (2021) observe, sustainability is no longer a peripheral elective for environmentalists but has become a transversal requirement essential for professional survival in an increasingly volatile global economy. By integrating these cross-cutting skills into every discipline - from accounting and engineering to healthcare and the arts - higher education acknowledges that climate-related disruptions, resource scarcity and shifting Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) regulations have fundamentally changed the professional landscape (Molthan-Hill et al., 2025). Consequently, sustainability literacy is no longer merely a matter of ethics; it is a critical necessity for the future job market, as professionals who lack these competencies are effectively ill-equipped to navigate the demands of a modern career.

Given the inherent complexity of the 2030 Agenda, there is a necessary shift in higher education toward sustainable development models that prioritize critical thinking over traditional memorization (Wiek et al., 2011; Wiek et al., 2015). While educational paradigms in emerging Asian economies have historically been rooted in reproductive rote learning (Barth et al., 2007), Southeast Asia is increasingly pivoting toward student-centered pedagogies and competency-based curricula, incorporating project-based learning and technology-enhanced instructional strategies (Hallinger, 1998; Kanthimathi & Dharma Raja, 2025). This transition allows students to move beyond passive consumption and actively engage with pressing real-world socio-economic and environmental challenges.

2.2. The evolution of journalism education in the 2030 Agenda

Journalism education serves as the vital "watchdog" of the 2030 Agenda, providing the ethical imperative required for reporting on complex global crises. In an era increasingly defined by "post-truth" dynamics and climate dis/misinformation, research argues that environmental communication must move beyond simple reporting toward stronger scientific communication, data literacy and algorithmic transparency (Essien, 2025), while environmental journalism itself has been shown to shape public perception and policy engagement (Rashmi et al., 2024). However, a persistent gap remains: while journalists often possess the ethical drive to address climate change and social inequality, they frequently lack the technical and data literacy required to interpret complex SDG indicators (Janoušková et al., 2019). To address this deficiency, recent studies highlight a structural pivot currently taking place in journalism curricula, particularly within emerging economies (Wang & Hasan, 2025; Zhang et al., 2022; Chen, 2025). By integrating evidence-based monitoring and data-driven sustainability reporting, the educational programs aim to ensure accountability and provide a truthful and holistic view of global progress necessary for modern public discourse (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2017).

This evolution is further shaped by the fact that marketing and journalism are increasingly linked through the art of narrative and audience engagement (Content

Garden. n.d.; MessageLab, n.d.). Modern marketing has adopted journalistic techniques - such as storytelling, investigative research, and editorial integrity - to create "content marketing" that provides genuine value rather than just a sales pitch (Kimber & Medina, 2026; Avalaunch Media, n.d.). Conversely, journalism frequently relies on marketing strategies to build sustainable digital subscriptions, understand reader analytics, and maintain brand relevance in a crowded media landscape (Fluxx, n.d.). Ultimately, both fields share a core objective: capturing and holding human attention by delivering information that resonates with a specific audience's needs, values, or curiosities.

2.3. Marketing sustainability: the strategic tool for social value creation

A critical evolution in recent scholarship is the strategic rebranding of sustainability as a sophisticated communication discipline. Moving significantly away from its commercial origins, this new paradigm adopts a "social value creation" model that utilizes marketing's core strategic tools - including narrative framing, audience segmentation, and digital engagement - to effectively communicate and sell the SDGs (Al-Ahmed et al., 2025; Voola et al., 2025).

By framing sustainability as a marketable asset, HEIs can bridge the persistent gap between academic theory and the burgeoning global demand for ESG expertise. In this context, marketing serves as a strategic tool to ensure that sustainability narratives are not merely abstract concepts, but are actionable, localized, and professionally relevant. Ultimately, this strategic alignment ensures that graduates are equipped with the high-demand competencies required by the modern workforce, thereby significantly enhancing their employability in a volatile global economy (Center for Sustainability and Excellence, 2025; Ogbolu et al., 2026; Lundy et al., 2022).

2.4. Digital infrastructure: the technological backbone of implementation

The implementation of modern sustainability curricula is linked to Information and Communication Technology (ICT), as the post-pandemic digital acceleration has fundamentally redefined the technological infrastructure of education. Al-Rahmi et al. (2020) demonstrate that Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are no longer merely repositories for files but have evolved into collaborative ecosystems that facilitate international co-creation. These environments now facilitate international co-creation and pedagogical innovations essential for sustainability education (Leal Filho et al., 2024).

Central to this infrastructure is the integration of specialized Research Units (RUs) equipped with advanced data analysis software. This development directly addresses the digital divide identified by Global Education Monitoring Report Team & South-East Asian Ministers of Education Organization (2023), which noted that a lack of high-performance data tools remains the primary barrier to effective SDG monitoring, particularly within Southeast Asian journalism. By providing the necessary empirical evidence, this technological backbone allows for the transformation of traditional journalistic stories into data-driven reports, ensuring the accurate monitoring of SDG indicators across underserved territories.

Despite a burgeoning body of scholarship on the SDGs, a critical lacuna persists at the intersection of education in journalism, marketing, and technology. Current research

remains largely siloed: media studies focus on narratives, business schools on marketing, and engineering departments on ICT. There is a complete absence of case studies that analyze the specific interplay between journalism ethics, marketing strategy and ICT facilitation.

The SDGsJR project serves to fill this theoretical and practical gap by providing empirical evidence of how a tripartite model (ethics + strategy + technology) fosters institutional and professional sustainability. This study shows that the interaction between these sectors goes far beyond mere overlap; rather, their combined influence drives a deep-seated organizational change within HEIs. By framing the project at the intersection of pedagogical reform, journalistic ethics, and strategic communication, it provides a replicable model for establishing the 2030 Agenda as a fundamental pillar of modern professional identity.

3. Methodology

The following two research questions drive the focus of this paper: 1) How do interdisciplinary co-creation processes in journalism curricula work to market the 2030 Agenda? and 2) How can this case serve as a blueprint for marketing sustainability in higher education, both in theory and in actual practice?

This research utilizes a qualitative instrumental case study methodology to investigate the dynamics of integrating SDGs into HEI curricula. Given its capacity for detailed, multi-dimensional analysis, this approach is effective for exploratory research aimed at understanding complex issues in their real-world environments. (Yin, 2003; Creswell, 1994; Crowe et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2018; Săvescu, 2024; Cumming & Norwood, 2012). The study focuses on a multi-institutional case study - SDGsJR Project - an Erasmus+ initiative involving a consortium of partners from Spain, Romania, Luxembourg, China, Cambodia and Malaysia.

To enhance the study's validity and ensure methodological rigor, the research incorporated a triangulation of various data sources. Data collection involved three primary methods, ensuring that the findings were grounded in the participants' lived experiences while being corroborated by official project records and observed operational dynamics:

- Semi-structured interviews with project leaders (steering group), staff (operational and academic), students, and media industry partners allowed for an in-depth understanding of how participants experienced and perceived the project implementation and impact.
- Documentary analysis. A systematic review of core project materials, such as the grant application and progress reports, was conducted to contextualize and cross-verify the findings from the interviews.
- Direct observation. Real-time monitoring of project workshops and meetings offered a first-hand look at the operational dynamics and interpersonal interactions driving the initiative.

To better understand the nuances of marketing sustainability, this multi-method approach gathered rich qualitative insights that clearly illustrate how the project was implemented in practice. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach, involving the triangulation of evidence from interviews, documentary analysis and direct

observations. This process ensured that the findings were grounded in the participants' lived experiences while being corroborated by official project records and observed operational dynamics. The analysis was executed in two distinct, progressive phases:

In the first phase the research team performed a line-by-line review of the interview transcripts, field notes from observations and project documents. The focus was on identifying and labeling specific text segments that described the operational mechanics of the project's collaborative efforts. Paragraphs were labeled with descriptive codes such as: *"syllabus co-design"* (segments describing the collaborative workshops where European and Asian partners designed the content of new SDGs modules); *"marketing strategy integration"* (passages detailing the integration of marketing techniques into journalism coursework); *"stakeholder and market feedback loops"* (labels identifying how input from local media agencies and labor market directly influenced the practical components of the curricula to ensure market alignment); *"technological mediation"* (passages regarding the co-creation of the VLE and the physical setup of RUs).

In the second phase, the four raw descriptive labels from the first phase were compared, clustered, and abstracted into two overarching themes that provide transferable insights for the theory and practice of marketing sustainability. Labels like "syllabus co-design" and "stakeholder and market feedback loops" were synthesized into the larger theme of "participatory curricular design" (sustainability education is most effective when it is a negotiated process between academia and industry, ensuring the 2030 Agenda is not just taught, but grounded in real-world professional needs.) Labels regarding "marketing strategy integration" and "technological mediation" were merged into the theme of "the tripartite model of marketing sustainability" (the marketing sustainability strategy is only effective when supported by a technological backbone).

This analytical progression allows the study to move from describing a project (phase 1) to defining a model for marketing the 2030 Agenda (phase 2). In this way, the descriptive data had been transformed into a set of transferable insights that provide a roadmap for other HEIs and international projects seeking to integrate the SDGs into professional training.

The study's ethical framework was grounded in transparency regarding the research scope, ensuring that all data collection and analysis adhered to the principles of informed consent and the safeguarding of participant privacy.

4. Results

4.1. Project concept

The SDGsJR project was a comprehensive international initiative aimed at bridging the gap between sustainability awareness (2030 Agenda) and professional journalism practice in Asian HEIs. The project was conceived to address critical educational and professional gaps, more specifically a systemic lack of specialized training, teaching capacity, and general awareness regarding the 17 SDGs within partner countries, specifically Cambodia, Malaysia, and China. The core philosophy of the project is that high-quality journalism is essential for shaping public discourse. The project argues that journalists and analysts need specific expertise to reflect a full, truthful, and holistic

view of global issues as defined by United Nations. This goes beyond mere content; it focuses on the way information is marketed to ensure it accurately monitors and interprets SDG indicators for decision-makers and civil society.

4.2. Project design and implementation

The main objective of the project was to establish a sustainable framework - including content design, training capacities and specialized equipment - to develop innovative higher education course programs that empower journalists and analysts to report on the SDGs with a full, truthful and holistic view.

The project was structured as an Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education initiative, spanning 48 months (November 2019 – November 2023). Led by the University of Santiago de Compostela (USC) in Spain, the project brought together a multifaceted consortium including: Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu/LBUS (Romania), Novel Group/NG (Luxembourg) and six Asian partner universities: University of Nottingham Ningbo/UNNC and Shenzhen Polytechnic/SZPT (China); Royal University of Phnom Penh/RUPP and National University of Battambang/NUBB (Cambodia); and University of Malaya/UM and Universiti Utara Malaysia/UUM (Malaysia).

The project shifted from traditional rote learning to a student-centered, participatory co-creation educational model. It started with a multi-stage approach, including a needs analysis (via questionnaires and focus groups with students, academic staff and journalists) to map territorial problems and identify training gaps and benchmarking against European Union (EU) best practices to identify knowledge gaps (Sălcudean et al., 2023). Further on, the project focused on the creation of the curriculum, the establishment of physical RUs and the development of the VLE. This involved collaborative work between EU and Asian partners to ensure alignment with both the Bologna process and local labor market needs. The Quality and Dissemination phases involved ongoing internal and external evaluation and a robust dissemination plan. Upon completion of the project, the platform registered over 461,000 visitors.

4.3. Project outputs

The project delivered a series of outputs designed to sustain the long-term impact of SDGs journalism education:

- Accredited innovative curricula and courses: through a blend of international collaboration and institutional tailoring, Asian partner universities developed accredited courses designed to advance SDGs. By implementing innovative pedagogical methods - ranging from field work to online learning - these newly created or updated programs provide a comprehensive educational experience for a diverse audience that includes undergraduate students, professional journalists and vulnerable groups. This unified yet flexible approach ensures that while each course meets specific degree requirements and local disciplinary needs, it contributes to a global perspective on sustainability and professional practice. Examples: UNNC developed the new courses entitled "Reporting SDGs" levels I and II and "SDGs Journalism News and Innovative Reporting"; SZPT approached SDGs by "Cultural Event

Planning & New Media Operation for Journalism Reporting”; NUBB integrated SDGs into "Digital Marketing and Journalism Report" course; UM added a new elective set on "SDGs in Digital World" for IT specializations; RUPP integrated “Media and Society in SDGs” course in the program Bachelor of Arts in Media Management; UM developed Journalism for Sustainable Development & SDGs in Journalism Reporting Workshop.

- Specialized RUs: physical labs were established at each Asian partner, equipped with high-performance hardware (computers, cameras, sound equipment) and professional software for data analysis and SDGs monitoring. These units serve as hubs for ongoing students and faculty research.
- VLE: a dedicated online platform (journalismreporting-vle.eu) was created to support course delivery in both online and onsite formats, facilitating lifelong learning and progress monitoring.
- Capacity building for academic staff: through "Training of Trainers" (ToT) sessions and study visits to Europe and across Asia, academic staff were trained in technicalities of marketing and monitoring SDGs indicators.
- Strategic partnerships: the project established formal agreements with media agencies to ensure that the educational outputs remain relevant to the professional journalism industry.
- Social inclusion and regional relevance: the project addressed social inclusion by prioritizing issues affecting vulnerable groups and remote areas, adapting content to local languages to remove barriers to the collective discourse. It prioritized reporting on issues like gender inequality, climate change effects on water and air, and poverty, ensuring that the educational initiatives are inclusive and reach those in remote or marginalized areas.

4.4. Project impact

The impact of the SDGsJR project extends across institutional, professional, and societal dimensions, creating a transformative shift in how sustainability is perceived and communicated within the Asian higher education landscape.

The project's most enduring impact is the institutionalization of the 2030 Agenda within the academic structures of the six Asian HEIs. By moving beyond temporary awareness campaigns to the formal accreditation of educational programs, the project has ensured that sustainability is now a permanent pillar of the curricula. This shift has not only modernized journalism education but has also fostered interdisciplinary synergy. Consequently, these institutions have reported an increase in their global profile and market attractiveness, positioning them as leaders in ESG aligned education in their respective regions.

The project has significantly enhanced the human capital of both academic staff and students. Through the ToTs initiative, faculty members acquired advanced pedagogical skills, enabling them to transition from traditional rote-learning methods to student-centered, practical teaching. For students, the impact is measured by the acquisition of sustainability as a core professional competency. Graduates are now equipped with the technical skills to monitor SDG indicators and the strategic marketing

skills to communicate these complex issues effectively. This has directly improved their employability, recognizing the value of SDG-literate journalists in the modern labor market.

On a structural level, the establishment of the VLE and the six physical RUs provides a lasting legacy of high-performance infrastructure for ongoing data analysis and SDGs monitoring. These units function as innovation hubs where students and researchers can continue to produce high-quality narratives that influence public discourse. Socially, the project's impact is reflected in its massive dissemination reach, with over 461,000 visitors engaging with project-related content. By prioritizing localized reporting on vulnerable groups and environmental pressures, the project has successfully "marketed" the SDGs to a broad audience, fostering a more informed and engaged civil society capable of holding decision-makers accountable to the 2030 Agenda.

5. Discussions

The SDGsJR project addresses a complex, multi-layered knowledge gap existing at the intersection of international sustainable development, higher education and professional media practices. In many partner regions, particularly in Southeast Asia, traditional educational models often rely on passive rote learning, creating a significant disconnect where students may be aware of the SDGs but lack the critical thinking and analytical skills required to market them effectively. To resolve this, the project shifts away from one-way communication (rote learning) toward a **competency-based model of marketing SDGs** - one that treats sustainability as an active professional skill rather than a static academic subject. In this context, marketing sustainability is redefined as a transformative educational framework that creates professional value by integrating the 17 SDGs directly into professional curricula. This ensures graduates can navigate and lead in a global economy where social and environmental impact is as critical as economic success. Within this framework, the project defines sustainability through a tripartite dimension of professional competency: knowledge - achieving a deep understanding of the 17 SDGs and their specific indicators; skills - developing the technical ability to utilize ICT and marketing tools to effectively report on and communicate these goals; attitude - cultivating a sense of global responsibility and a strong foundation of professional ethics.

Five core principles relevant to the theory and practice of marketing the 2030 Agenda can be drawn.

1. *The principle of tripartite infrastructure.* Marketing sustainability effectively requires the simultaneous alignment of ethics, storytelling, strategic communication of value and technological resources. Historically, these fields have functioned in isolation: *Journalism* possesses the ethical drive but often lacks the strategic tools to reach modern audiences; *Marketing* possesses the strategic tools but is rarely applied to social or environmental ethics in a non-commercial way; and *ICT tools* provide the data infrastructure but are frequently disconnected from the art of storytelling.

The SDGsJR project addresses the complete absence of research that integrates these three domains into a unified "marketing sustainability" framework, generating a structural transformation through their synergy:

- *Journalism (the ethical imperative):* provides the foundational principles for truthful, holistic reporting and the social responsibility to monitor global goals.

- *Marketing (the strategic tool)*: utilizes specific techniques, such as audience segmentation, compelling narratives and value communication, to make complex SDGs actionable and relevant to the public.
- *ICT (the technological infrastructure)*: provides the digital platforms (VLE) and data analysis tools (RUs) necessary to monitor and visualize SDGs indicators effectively.

This integration establishes a new “triple bottom line” for modern journalism pedagogy, grounded in ethics (social responsibility theory), strategy (strategic communication and narrative framing), and technical agility (data science and ICT literacy). As Zhang & Lin (2024) note, the journalist of the future is no longer just a storyteller but a data-strategist who leverages marketing tools to ensure their ethical reporting achieves maximum public impact. By merging these disparate fields, the SDGsJR project provides a vital empirical proof-of-concept, filling the gap where academic theory meets large-scale international implementation.

2. *The principle of territorial relevance.* Marketing global goals is only effective when the content is localized to meet the specific socio-economic needs of the target region. By bridging the gap between abstract global sustainability targets and specific socio-cultural realities, the project demonstrates that the 2030 Agenda is most successfully marketed through a model of localized value co-creation that rejects traditional one-size-fits-all reporting. This approach suggests that for sustainability to become truly resonant and actionable, practitioners must move beyond generic global narratives and instead identify the distinct socio-economic and environmental pressures of a specific territory - addressing critical issues such as localized climate change impacts, gender inequality and regional economic disparities. This movement directly reflects a key theme: the decolonization of sustainability education. Mignolo & Walsh (2018) warn against “epistemological domination”, where Western-centric sustainability models are imposed on the Global South without considering local nuances. The SDGsJR project mitigates this risk through territorial relevance, ensuring that the marketing of the 2030 Agenda is culturally authentic by centering on site-specific challenges, such as water management and climate change in Cambodia versus quality of education, good health and well-being in rural Malaysia or sustainable communities and decent work in China.

This methodology reflects the theory of globalization which posits that global goals are only successful when indigenized to meet local priorities, transforming abstract targets into culturally authentic narratives that resonate with the authentic needs of the local audience (Robertson, 1995; Jamil & de-Lima-Santos, 2025; Rana, 2025).

3. *The principle of institutionalization.* For 2030 Agenda to be marketed long-term, sustainability must be embedded in accredited academic structures rather than treated as a temporary campaign. A significant hurdle identified in recent literature is “institutional inertia” - the resistance of traditional academic environments to interdisciplinary change. Leal Filho et al. (2024) argue that while many universities sign sustainability charters, the actual translation of these goals into curricula is frequently hindered by departmental silos. The SDGsJR project addresses these systemic deficits - including the lack of specialized staff training, technological gaps in data monitoring and the disconnect between classroom theory and industry requirements - by utilizing a grounded theory of competency-based co-

creation. To ensure durability, the project employs a multi-tiered strategy of institutionalization that functions across three distinct levels: strategic level (securing top-down management support to authorize structural reform); operational level (building a network of trained ambassadors to integrate the mission into daily university operations); community level (establishing a collaborative ecosystem between academia and the media industry). This bottom-up co-creation model aligns with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which suggests that for a new professional identity - such as the SDG-literate journalist - to take hold, learning should occur in a social context through dynamic, reciprocal interactions among personal, behavioral and environmental factors.

In this framework, the establishment of physical RUs acts as a social anchor, providing a tangible space where abstract global goals are transformed into localized professional practice. By moving beyond awareness campaigns toward formalized accreditation and long-term industry agreements, the project ensures that the SDG-literate professional is consistently integrated into the labor market, sustaining the impact of the 2030 Agenda long after the conclusion of initial project funding.

4. The principle of multi-stakeholder co-creation. Central to the project's grounded theory is the concept that competency-based co-creation serves as a potent form of internal marketing. By repositioning students and academic staff as active peer co-creators rather than passive consumers of information, the initiative effectively dismantles traditional barriers to engagement and fosters deep institutional buy-in. This shift moves the educational model from a top-down delivery of information to a bottom-up participatory process. In this framework, peer co-creation allows academic staff, students, and professional media partners to act as equal partners in curriculum design, transforming them into authentic brand ambassadors for the 2030 Agenda.

In the realm of strategic marketing, the 2030 Agenda is increasingly viewed through the lens of stakeholder theory (Dmytriiev & Freeman, 2023) suggesting that marketing a social cause is no longer a one-way communication but a process of value co-creation. For the SDGsJR project, the market value of the curriculum is determined by its relevance to a diverse network of actors: students (seeking high-demand ESG competencies to elevate their market value); media agencies (seeking journalists capable of navigating complex global data and meeting rigorous professional standards); local communities (seeking representation of their specific territorial problems). By integrating these stakeholders into the syllabus design through comprehensive needs analyses, focus groups, and surveys, the project moves from "teaching the SDGs" to "marketing a sustainable future" where each actor has a vested interest in the outcome. This synergy between academia and industry effectively closes the gap between classroom theory and professional practice. Ultimately, by shifting the focus from abstract goals to a tangible, high-value skill set, the project ensures that the resulting "SDG-literate journalist" is personally invested in the message, proving that the marketing of a social cause is most successful when those delivering it are active participants in its co-production.

5. The principle of rebranding sustainability reporting as a marketable asset. Ultimately, the project succeeds by rebranding sustainability reporting as a core, marketable professional competency rather than a peripheral elective. This theoretical framework posits that for the 2030 Agenda to be successfully integrated into higher education, it must be framed as a

value-added professional asset. By aligning curricula with international standards (such as the Bologna process) and emerging business trends like ESGs, the project transforms sustainability literacy into a powerful tool for enhanced employability and career mobility. Graduates are equipped with the narrative power to synthesize data monitoring and compelling storytelling, allowing them to effectively "sell" the importance of the SDGs to decision-makers and civil society alike. This interdisciplinary integration of journalistic ethics, marketing strategy and digital tools does more than just empower the individual; it simultaneously increases the institutional competitiveness and global profile of the participating HEIs. In summary, the project has established a professional skill set that is both socially responsible and economically viable, ensuring that graduates are prepared to lead within the evolving global landscape.

In conclusion, the case study highlights how the SDGsJR project functioned as a strategy for marketing sustainability by embedding it into diverse professional paths. It offers a replicable roadmap for other international projects, suggesting that the marketing of global goals is not about superficial promotion, but about building the structural and ethical capacity to make those goals a lived reality in professional practice. By framing the SDGs as tools that increase a graduate's competitiveness and marketability, HEIs can overcome the barriers of rote learning. For sustainability to be effectively marketed in an educational or professional context, it must transition from being an abstract academic topic ("sustainability" education) to a value-added professional asset ("marketing sustainability as a competency").

6. Conclusions

The SDGsJR project does not just add more information about the SDGs; it addresses the structural and strategic gap in how that information is processed, taught, and communicated to create actual social impact. The project serves as a model for making sustainability a permanent pillar of professional education. It demonstrates that marketing sustainability is not about superficial promotion or about a niche topic in ethics. Instead, it is an interconnected concept, a transformative educational framework where global agendas are internalized and communicated within HEIs through a synergistic blend of ethics, strategic narrative and data-driven infrastructure. While significant literature exists on the SDGs in isolation, the project makes four primary contributions to the field. The most significant contribution is the shift from a mono-disciplinary approach to a tripartite model. Traditionally, journalism, marketing, and ICT have been taught in silos. The study provides a scholarly rationale for the synergy between these disciplines: journalism acts as the ethical imperative, defining the "what" and the "why" of reporting SDGs; marketing acts as the strategic tool, providing the "how" to make the SDGs resonate with diverse audiences; ICT acts as the technological infrastructure, providing the "where" (VLEs) and the analytical power (RUs) for data-driven evidence. Secondly, the project advances educational theory by shifting from passive awareness to an active core competency (active skills), framing sustainability literacy as a high-value, marketable asset that directly aligns academic education with 21st century labor market demands. Thirdly, the project advances the theory of edu-communication by demonstrating that global goals

(like the 2030 Agenda) lose their market value if they are not localized. Through its methodology, the project establishes a grounded theory of territorial relevance, suggesting that the marketing of sustainability is most effective when it is co-created with local stakeholders to address specific regional socio-economic and environmental pressures. And finally, the SDGsJR project theorizes that structural transformation in HEIs occurs through a bottom-up participatory process rather than top-down mandates. By involving students and staff as peer co-creators in the design of the curricula, the project provides a model for how international capacity-building can foster long-term institutional change and internal marketing within universities.

The study is affected by a few limitations. First, the findings are heavily rooted in specific contexts of the three Asian countries involved in the project (China, Cambodia and Malaysia), meaning the territorial relevance strategies might look very different in Western, Latin American or African educational systems. Second, the model relies on a tripartite infrastructure that requires significant investment in technology (like RUs and VLEs) and top-down management support; in resource-strapped institutions, this ideal setup might be difficult to replicate. Additionally, the study captures a snapshot of success rather than long-term, multi-decade behavioral shifts. Finally, while the focus on journalism and ITC is strong, the study doesn't fully explore how this marketing approach would adapt to more rigid disciplines like medicine or engineering.

Future efforts should focus on tracking graduates over time to see if learning sustainability as a professional skill actually helps them get better jobs and faster promotions. Studying how artificial intelligence can help turn global data into interesting local stories that actually mean something to different groups of people would be also interesting. At the same time, it is necessary to compare different countries to see which parts of this marketing sustainability model work everywhere and which parts have to be changed to fit local culture.

7. References

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