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Purpose and Profit: Social and Environmental Marketing for Large Companies in Adverse Scenarios

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored how large companies use social and environmental marketing to boost results in adverse scenarios, analyzing interviews with marketing managers and public documents. The findings reveal distinct strategies. To attract investors, environmental, social, and governance (ESG) communication is targeted at limited-reach channels, demonstrating that such practices reduce operating costs and improve financial results, attracting capital for innovation. This practice makes it difficult to attract value-focused investors. For consumer sales, success occurs by combining broad-reach campaigns with consultants who justify premium prices or by associating products with relevant social causes (e.g., women's self-esteem), which allows for higher prices and increased sales. A critical challenge is influencing "disengaged consumers," who prioritize traditional attributes. This preference generates apprehension regarding actions that could jeopardize the company's image and profits, hindering innovation. The managerial implications suggest better communication for investors and cautious strategies for disengaged consumers.

1 | Introduction

Large corporations face a central paradox in the era of sustainability and corporate social responsibility: on the one hand, they are pressured by growing social, regulatory, and market demands to adopt robust social and environmental practices to ensure their legitimacy and organizational resilience (Luo et al. 2025; Shahid 2025). On the other hand, implementing these initiatives is a minefield of risks, including high costs that can negatively impact cash reserves (Chen et al. 2025), consumer skepticism that can lead to brand disloyalty (Yuan et al. 2024), and inconsistent financial results that defy justification (Jhunjhunwala and Fatima 2025). In this scenario, senior management engagement becomes crucial (Li et al. 2025). Still, it directly depends on the company's ability to mitigate these risks and demonstrate that investments are not just a cost, but a strategic value driver.

To resolve this paradox, social and environmental marketing emerges as a fundamental strategic tool, designed to bridge sustainability commitments and market performance (Papadas et al. 2024). To ensure continued management commitment, social and environmental initiatives cannot be viewed simply as a cost center; they must generate tangible value. Social and environmental marketing can act precisely as the mechanism that aligns purpose with profit, translating a company's social and environmental actions into improved reputation, consumer loyalty, and positive financial results. In this way, the approach directly responds to executive leadership's demand for returns that justify investments in a complex and sometimes controversial field (Barreto et al. 2025).

The success of socio-environmental marketing depends on its ability to influence consumer perception, transforming a brand's actions into a pillar of trust (Nagendra et al. 2024) and purchase intention (Liczmańska-Kopcewicz et al. 2024). The literature already points to effective strategies for achieving this goal, such as the use of certifications, eco-seals, and sustainable packaging, which have been shown to impact consumer decisions positively (Califano et al. 2025; Huang et al. 2024; Xue et al. 2023). However, this mechanism faces a central external barrier that defines the current adverse scenario: high consumer sensitivity to price (Luengo-Valderrey et al. 2022). The fear that the costs inherent in socio-environmental actions will raise prices and drive customers away is the main obstacle to innovation and the full implementation of these strategies (Jesse et al. 2025; Pourranjbar and Shokouhyar 2023).

There remains a significant gap in empirical studies that holistically analyze how companies, in practice, use socio-environmental marketing to overcome the price barrier and boost their results (Pourranjbar and Shokouhyar 2023; Shamsuzzoha and Fontell 2024). The dichotomy between the opportunity to leverage sales through socio-environmental actions and the obstacles that make up this adverse scenario reveals a complex and underexplored challenge. There is a lack of a clear understanding of which tactics and strategic approaches can effectively generate financial growth while contributing positively to society and the planet (Pontes et al. 2024). A better understanding of how to align purpose and profit (Papadas et al. 2024) can help to engage senior management (Li et al. 2025) and to enhance the relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and profit management (Jhunjhunwala and Fatima 2025). Therefore, this study investigates how large companies use socio-environmental marketing to boost results in an adverse scenario.

The focus on large companies in other sectors aims to identify how organizations achieving success in their social and environmental initiatives can inspire small and medium-sized organizations in different economic activities to adapt their marketing campaigns designed to generate financial gains with their socio-environmental contributions. Furthermore, this focus seeks to determine how these organizations deal with potential criticism and bleak perspectives regarding their social and environmental initiatives. Understanding how these organizations overcame the challenges and increased their sales and profits can inspire other organizations to prioritize these social and environmental initiatives.

2 | Literature Review

Large companies use socio-environmental marketing to boost results, especially in adverse scenarios, and this is a complex and multifaceted field of study. The academic literature reveals an intricate web of relationships that connects consumer values, corporate strategies, financial performance, and external environmental pressures. This review consolidates the evidence on how companies navigate this terrain, beginning with an understanding of the factors that influence conscious consumption, moving through marketing, communication, and campaign design strategies, and culminating in an analysis of the controversial relationship between sustainability and corporate performance, with a special focus on the role of CSR.

2.1 | Understanding the Conscious Consumer

The foundation for any effective socio-environmental marketing strategy lies in deeply understanding the factors that motivate conscious consumption. A complex interplay of personal values, product attributes, and contextual influences shapes the purchasing journey.

The motivation for green consumption often originates from the consumer's intrinsic values and sense of identity. Fundamental values such as altruism, the search for uniqueness, and a genuine concern for the planet's future are primary drivers (Bhardwaj et al. 2023). Consumers who prioritize sustainability and actively seek products that reflect their values are more likely to purchase green products. Psychological factors like "green self-identity" deepen this behavior, which directly influences purchase intention (Confente et al. 2020). For many, therefore, choosing a sustainable product is not merely a transaction but an act of identity affirmation.

Beyond values, cognitive and qualitative assessments play a crucial role. Environmental awareness related to green products significantly influences purchase intention (Kautish et al. 2019; Meet et al. 2024; Mohd Suki and Mohd Suki 2019). This awareness is often accompanied by a rational evaluation of product quality and the perceived commitment to the environmental cause, indicating that consumers seek both an ideal and a tangible, high-quality solution (Long et al. 2024; Yarimoglu and Binboga 2019). Other factors in this evaluation include e-service quality, perceptions of CSR, trust, and the overall perceived value of the offering (Ahmad and Zhang 2020). Additionally, a pragmatic cost–benefit analysis often guides green purchasing behavior, as consumers weigh the advantages against the costs (Dangelico et al. 2021).

This individual calculus, however, does not occur in a vacuum; external and social forces profoundly shape it. The importance of social norms in shaping sustainability-related attitudes and behaviors is well-documented (He et al. 2021; Nascimento and Maria Correia Loureiro 2024). The purchase decision can also be influenced by emotions and the consumer's perception of the effectiveness of their own actions (Yeo et al. 2022). In an increasingly digital marketplace, social media marketing has become a powerful tool for influencing consumer behavior (Nekmahmud et al. 2022). The scope of external influencers is broad, even including tangential concerns such as food safety, which can steer consumers toward products perceived as green and safe (Liu et al. 2022). However, it is crucial to note that this framework of influencers is not universal; key factors like environmental awareness can vary significantly across different cultures, challenging the application of standardized global marketing strategies (M. De Silva et al. 2021).

2.2 | Marketing in Adverse Scenarios

Once consumer motivations are understood, companies must employ effective marketing strategies to translate this knowledge into market performance. The literature reveals a fundamental strategic crossroads: competing based on price, a volatile and context-dependent variable, or building a more resilient market position through robust product and brand strategies.

2.2.1 | The Paradox of Price and Product

The pricing strategy for sustainable products is perhaps the most complex. Its effectiveness is highly dependent on the economic and sociodemographic context. In an emerging economy, for example, price can positively influence the purchase intention of eco-friendly products. However, this effect is moderated by variables such as gender, education, and income, requiring careful segmentation (Meet et al. 2024).

This relationship becomes even more tense in times of economic crisis. In such periods, “price” and “product” become the dominant factors influencing purchase decisions, overshadowing “promotion” and “place.” This influence creates a critical dilemma: while disseminating environmental information is more significant in shaping ecological attitudes during a crisis, the typically higher prices of green products simultaneously strongly negatively affect actual purchasing behavior (Luengo-Valderrey et al. 2022). Companies, therefore, face a scenario where the appeal of their green message may be highest, but the price barrier is also at its most formidable.

As a strategic alternative, the literature focuses on “product” and “brand” to build intrinsic value. This approach is efficient with younger consumers, for whom factors like the willingness to buy green products and the perception of their benefits and quality are positively associated with their environmental concerns (Lopes et al. 2024). The goal is to proactively reinforce the product's “green” image, making it a desirable choice regardless of price promotions. To achieve this, strategies that combine marketing tools with policies like eco-labeling can significantly increase the perception that a product is “green” (Xue et al. 2023). The most successful strategies unite tangible product attributes, such as eco-friendly packaging and transparent labeling, with collaborative efforts, such as strategic partnerships that reinforce the brand's sustainability credentials (Huang et al. 2024).

2.2.2 | Communication, Trust, and Campaign Design

Effective communication is the linchpin that connects a company's sustainable actions to consumer perception and market success. The primary goal of green communication is to foster “green brand trust,” a critical mediating variable that positively influences purchase intentions. This trust is built on the company's overall image and consumer receptivity to its green advertising (Rahman and Nguyen-Viet 2023; Riva et al. 2024).

However, a significant obstacle is “green skepticism,” which can severely weaken the effect of a brand's association with sustainability on consumer trust (Rahman and Nguyen-Viet 2023; Riva et al. 2024). The literature reveals that transparency alone is not enough. At the same time, non-deception is crucial; the mere disclosure of information does not necessarily impact the relationship between a green brand image and trust (Rahman and Nguyen-Viet 2023). Instead, companies must engage in stronger and more credible signaling efforts to facilitate a genuine brand association and thus earn consumer trust (Riva et al. 2024).

The design of effective campaigns depends on a complex architecture, from message composition to the media environment. Ad-specific factors, such as the message core and framing, influence consumer response to ethical appeals (Tran and Paparoidamis 2021). Creativity is crucial, and creative environmental ads are more efficient at capturing attention and connecting with altruistic values (Shen et al. 2020). Using “power messages” can strengthen consumer self-efficacy and, consequently, their purchase intention (Mannem et al. 2023). The source of an incentive can also promote or hinder a message's effectiveness, making the sender a strategic factor (Boenke et al. 2022). Finally, the advent of digital media introduces additional challenges, such as consumer segmentation, choosing the right platforms, and the ideal timing for promotion (Pereira et al. 2024).

2.3 | Performance, Governance, and Social Responsibility

The relationship between Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) practices, CSR, and corporate performance is marked by notable complexity, with the literature often presenting contradictory evidence.

2.3.1 | Sustainability and Financial Performance

One stream of the literature suggests a positive correlation. Pursuing improved financial performance and reduced capital costs often drives CSR initiatives (AL-Akheli et al. 2025). Engagement in corporate environmental responsibility has been shown to positively impact economic performance, especially in family-owned firms (Gangi et al. 2025). Strong ESG performance also enhances organizational resilience, primarily by lowering the cost of debt financing (Luo et al. 2025), and plays a crucial role in mitigating financial distress in industrial companies (Liu et al. 2024). During periods of instability, ESG investments have also demonstrated lower volatility, suggesting a defensive characteristic (Iannone et al. 2025).

However, this positive narrative is challenged by contrasting findings. High ESG performance can negatively impact a firm's cash holdings by reducing internal resources (Chen et al. 2025). In highly competitive markets, compliance with environmental regulations may even harm profitability (Silva 2025). The literature also indicates that strong environmental performance does not always lead to superior economic performance, with notable differences across sectors (Janicka and Sajnóg 2023).

2.3.2 | The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Corporate Social Responsibility is a central element that interconnects company operations, market perception, and overall performance. A transparent conceptual interconnection exists between CSR practices, firm performance, and a company's ESG governance practice (Abu Afifa et al. 2025). In the social sphere, CSR directly impacts consumer relations. Large-scale events, such as the COVID-19 crisis, amplified the influence of CSR on consumer behavior, accelerating sustainability communication strategies (Ghassab et al. 2025).

Consumers prefer messaging that incorporates Circular Economy, CSR, and ESG concepts in their purchasing decisions (Kolling and Ribeiro 2025). However, a significant gap persists, as most consumers still have low knowledge of corporate initiatives in these areas, which can lead to skepticism (Kolling et al. 2023). Negative attitudes toward a company's CSR initiatives can lead to brand disloyalty (Yuan et al. 2024). Interestingly, research suggests that companies are often more inclined to integrate social issues into their business strategies than environmental concerns, indicating a differential focus across the dimensions of ESG (Krasodomska and Eisenschmidt 2025).

Pursuing organizational legitimacy and reputation is one of the main drivers for corporate engagement in CSR, where altruistic motives and the search for perceived legitimacy strengthen a company's standing (Shahid 2025). Furthermore, expenditures on CSR, along with sustainability reporting, positively affect both environmental innovation and corporate reputation (Arhinful et al. 2025). However, CSR can adversely affect innovation if certain underlying conditions are not met. Managers should carefully align their CSR initiatives with internal communication strategies and employee empowerment practices to foster innovation (Kim et al. 2025).

2.3.3 | Governance and Legitimacy

Corporate governance is the critical vector for the meaningful and authentic integration of sustainability. Companies with sustainability committees and greater female representation on their boards tend to exhibit higher-quality environmental disclosures (Khalid and Rawat 2025). A diverse and ESG-experienced board can moderate the negative impacts of economic policy uncertainty on ecological performance (Ayadi et al. 2025). Therefore, the governance structure is key in implementing ESG to impact the Sustainable Development Goals (Tyan et al. 2024).

Despite the benefits, pursuing a positive image can lead to superficial practices. Complexity in accounting and reporting can hinder transparency, masking a lack of real impact (Al Amosh 2025). This possibility reinforces the perception that, for market performance, "being green is good, but above all, it is good to look green" (Amores-Salvadó et al. 2023). This tension between communication and substantial action remains one of the main challenges for companies seeking legitimacy through their socio-environmental initiatives.

2.4 | Stakeholders Theory

Stakeholder Theory (Freeman and Reed 1983) provides a foundational lens for examining how large corporations enact CSR and sustainability initiatives, especially within the domain of environmental marketing (Mubushar et al. 2025). Stakeholders are defined as individuals or groups who affect or are affected by an organization's actions, objectives, and policies, a category that includes customers, employees, investors, governments, suppliers, and the broader community (Shi and Veenstra 2021). A central tenet of this theory holds that, particularly during periods of market instability or adverse scenarios, organizational success is contingent upon the firm's ability to satisfy and balance the demands of key institutional entities and influential stakeholder groups (ElGammal et al. 2018; Ullmann 1985). The successful integration of environmentally friendly practices, such as green servitization, enables firms to meet these expectations, strengthening their CSR posture and fostering trust among customers and stakeholders (Oyelakin et al. 2025). This capacity to address external demands is intrinsically tied to organizational legitimacy (Deephouse and Suchman 2008).

Within hybrid-competitive markets, where consumer ethical concerns over environmental and human rights standards are prominent, corporations leverage CSR initiatives to build sustainable growth and competitive advantage (Mubushar et al. 2025). This pursuit of legitimacy is critical, as it enhances a firm's capacity to secure stakeholder approval and cultivate goodwill, particularly during crises (Deephouse and Suchman 2008). Moreover, an effective response to stakeholder demands—often expressed as pressure for greater sustainability and social responsibility—tends to bolster perceptions of organizational legitimacy (Santiago et al. 2025). From a marketing and operational standpoint, CSR strategies must manifest as tangible actions that deliver value to key internal and external stakeholders (Mubushar et al. 2025). This manifest necessitates navigating the inherent challenge of addressing diverse stakeholder groups with divergent demands and priorities (de Menezes et al. 2022).

Successful CSR implementation and value co-creation thus depend on prioritizing the most crucial stakeholders—namely, employees and customers—during strategy formulation (Abugre and Nyuur 2015; Mubushar et al. 2025). Engaging in socially responsible actions influences customer-related outcomes, including loyalty and purchase intentions (Mubushar et al. 2025). In the banking sector, for example, customer-centric CSR plays a pivotal role in shaping value co-creation behaviors (Mubushar et al. 2025). Furthermore, managing the "expectation gap" between corporate promises and community needs requires the inclusion of key local stakeholders, such as regional directors (Tawiah et al. 2024). This involvement ensures that CSR initiatives, often enacted as social and environmental marketing projects, are relevant, effective, and aligned with the critical needs of the host community, thereby forging a robust, reciprocal bond and supporting sustainable business operations (Tawiah et al. 2024).

2.5 | Literature Summary

This literature review explores how large companies could use socio-environmental marketing to boost results in adverse scenarios. The effectiveness of this approach begins with understanding the conscious consumer, whose decisions are motivated by a complex interplay of personal values, green identity, cognitive assessments, and social influences. Companies face a strategic dilemma, especially in crises, where the high price of sustainable products can negate the appeal of the environmental message. The more resilient alternative is to build brand value through product attributes and authentic communication to overcome consumer skepticism and foster trust. The relationship between these socio-environmental initiatives and financial performance is controversial; the literature presents evidence of positive correlations (greater resilience, better reputation) and negative or neutral ones. CSR is central in connecting with consumers and driving innovation, but its impact depends on genuine implementation. Finally, robust corporate governance is fundamental to ensuring authenticity and avoiding superficiality. Companies' core challenge is to align their communication with substantive actions to achieve legitimacy and lasting success.

Table 1 presents a summary of the literature reviewed.

TABLE 1 | Summary of the literature reviewed.

Code	Summary
The conscious consumer	Consumer behavior is driven by a complex interplay of personal values (altruism, green identity), cognitive evaluations (environmental awareness, product quality, trust), and external influences (social norms, digital media). These factors vary culturally.
Marketing in adverse scenarios	Companies face a strategic dilemma between competing on price—a volatile variable that can become a crisis barrier—and building a resilient brand. The most robust alternative is to focus on the product and the brand, using authentic and credible communication to overcome consumer skepticism and build trust, as transparency alone is insufficient.
Performance, governance and social responsibility	The relationship between social and environmental practices and financial performance is controversial. The literature points to both benefits (resilience, reputation) and drawbacks (reduced cash flow, lower profitability). CSR is central to consumer relations and innovation. Strong corporate governance is essential to ensure authenticity and avoid superficiality. The main challenge is aligning communication with substantive actions to achieve legitimacy.

3 | Research Method

3.1 | Method Selection

Research on the use of marketing to communicate corporate socio-environmental actions to boost sales and financial results is still in its early stages. The need to deepen the scientific understanding of topics such as social innovations highlights this gap (Tabares et al. 2025). The methodological literature indicates that exploratory studies are crucial for investigating topics at an early stage. This research adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach without relying on a specific theory (Yin 2009). The objective is to identify how a company that stands out in ESG uses socio-environmental marketing to generate results valued by consumers, financial managers, and investors. Analyzing these marketing strategies can shed light on ways for future research to investigate how companies can strengthen the integration and appreciation of socio-ambiental actions in their business models.

A more in-depth analysis of qualitative studies indicates that descriptive richness and the ability to explore emerging phenomena stand out as strengths of investigations based on qualitative methods (Ridder 2017). This approach is the only one that allows investigating the questions "what" and "how," expanding knowledge about the topic under analysis (Meredith 1998). Additionally, the method enables an in-depth examination of the phenomena under study, offering flexibility in the design phase (Merriam and Tisdell 2015; Yin 2009) and allowing the collection of a substantial volume of enlightening data (Yin 2009).

3.2 | Research Design

To define the primary constructs of this study, a literature review was conducted that considered the following key expressions: green marketing, ESG, sales, profits, circular economy, recycling, and remanufacturing. In the Web of Science (Wos) and Scopus databases, this research focused on the last 3 years and gathered only scientific journals with a percentage above 87.5% (according to Scopus). A total of 1091 articles were found—the number reduced to 215 after reading the titles and abstracts to adapt them to the research question. The coding of the findings of these 215 articles indicates that previous studies investigated the purchase drivers and the marketing strategies that companies can use to exploit these drivers. For the purposes of this research, these drivers were organized into values and beliefs, product differentials, and social norms. Marketing strategies include price, product and brand specifications, communication, campaigns, social media, packaging, and partnerships.

The analysis of the literature on consumption influencers and communication-based marketing strategies (see Table 1) and the stakeholder theory (Freeman and Reed 1983) inspired the proposition of the following groups of questions:

- Effectiveness of socio-environmental marketing: How do consumers perceive and interpret companies' marketing messages, especially regarding authenticity and "greenwashing"? What are the main factors that influence the purchasing decisions of different consumers regarding socio-environmental causes, and how do these factors interact with socio-environmental marketing strategies? How does the communication of socio-environmental actions by companies affect the perception of the quality and value of products and services?

- Challenges and strategies: What are the main challenges in developing and implementing effective marketing campaigns? How can companies adapt their marketing strategies to attract and influence consumers without compromising trust and loyalty? How can communication actions contribute to building long-term relationships with consumers?
- Impact: How can companies balance communicating their commitments with communicating their product and service attributes to maximize impact on sales and brand image?

3.3 | Sources of Information

Only companies recognized for their ESG-related actions were selected for the study. The list of these companies was obtained through an internet search (Castelo 2023; MERCO 2023). The six companies selected are from the processed food, banking, beverage, cleaning products, cosmetics, and telecommunications sectors. The company selection criteria considered the experience of the managers interviewed. Details about the selection of these managers are presented below. Table 2 presents information about these companies.

A search for potential interviewees was conducted once the list of companies was in hand. This search was carried out by analyzing the resumes posted on LinkedIn. It was decided to select only executives who had worked at the company with good ESG practices or at its most significant competitor. According to the researchers, the executives should have left the company no more than 4 years ago. This criterion aimed to avoid future complications for the interviewees (due to the compliance policies of large corporations). Eliminating the risk of problems with the company's policies allowed the interviewees to answer the questions without issues. The application of these criteria revealed 37 professionals who met these interviewee profile definitions. These professionals were then contacted by email, and only eight responded positively to the invitation. The executives who agreed to participate in the study only requested that the questions not be about their current company and that the interviews not be recorded.

To validate the data collection instrument, a draft of the manuscript containing the introduction, the literature review, and the semi-structured questions was previously shared with the eight participating professionals (Merriam and Tisdell 2015; Yin 2009). The interviews were scheduled within a range of 8 to 19 days after the draft submission, depending on the availability of the participants. Respect for the privacy and confidentiality of the interviewees and the companies involved was ensured by omitting specific details. Thus, the respondents were identified only by letters and numbers throughout the study. Table 3 presents the interviewees' profiles.

3.4 | Data Collection

The research employed a multi-method approach, combining semi-structured interviews with marketing managers, analysis of secondary data (public documents on the marketing actions under study), and direct observation of the companies' marketing actions. The semi-structured interviews, lasting an average of 120 min, were conducted between October 2024 and February 2025 with eight marketing managers. The aim was to collect in-depth reflections on the requested data (Merriam and Tisdell 2015; Yin 2009). The questions, based on two groups of constructs (influencers and strategies) and complemented

TABLE 2 | Information about the selected companies.

Code	Company details
Bank	One of the three largest banks in Brazil. The bank offers a comprehensive range of financial services, including retail banking, investment banking, and asset management, both in Brazil and abroad.
Beverage	A global company that manufactures, distributes, and markets beers, soft drinks, and other non-alcoholic beverages.
Cleaning	A multinational company that produces and sells everything from personal hygiene and household cleaning products to health and beauty care.
Cosmetics	A multinational company that produces and sells cosmetics and hygiene and beauty products.
Iogurt	Multinational food and beverage company focusing on dairy products and specialized nutrition.
Telecon	A telecommunications company that offers mobile and fixed telephony services, internet, pay television, and digital solutions for residential and business customers.

TABLE 3 | Profile of interviewees.

Manager	Profile
M1	Marketing manager with experience in the beverage and telecommunications industries.
M2	Marketing manager with experience in the cosmetics industry and the processed food industry.
M3	Marketing manager with experience in the food and beverage industry.
M4	Marketing manager with experience in the banking and telecommunications sector.
M5	Marketing manager with experience in the cleaning products sector.
M6	Marketing manager with experience in the cleaning products and telecommunications sector.
M7	Marketing manager with experience in the banking sector.
M8	Marketing manager with experience in the cosmetics and cleaning products sector.

by secondary materials (websites and social media data), were initially open-ended, allowing for further exploration of specific topics based on the interviewees' responses. A pilot test was conducted with three market experts, who provided valuable feedback in online meetings. This test aimed to ensure the clarity and relevance of the questions. The interviews were not recorded, but all were digitally transcribed after they were performed, and additional notes and impressions were documented to enrich the analysis. This triangulation of data, combining different sources and methods, allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the marketing actions of the companies under study.

3.5 | Data Analysis

The research team conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews (Bardin 2011; Braun and Clarke 2006). First, it was interpreted the interviewees' responses (Yin 2009). Initial coding was done manually, immediately after each interview, following a structured process: (i) thorough evaluation of the textual data; (ii) identification and selection of themes that would allow the collection, interpretation and comparison of relevant findings across the interviews, aligning them with the research constructs; (iii) coding and identification of inductive themes, emerging from the data, and deductive themes, derived from the literature review; and (iv) validation of the coding by the interviewees, who thoroughly approved the researchers' work.

After validation, the data were organized into cluster findings (Gioia et al. 2013). This analysis resulted in three thematic clusters: Investor Attraction, Consumer Sales, and The Challenges of the Unengaged. A comprehensive data check was also conducted to meet the research objectives (Yin 2009). This check, conducted by the researchers, sought to ensure the robustness of the study's findings, evidence, and conclusions. In the subsequent stage, triangulations were performed using secondary data to validate and corroborate the findings. The rigor of the research was ensured by using multiple sources of evidence, including interviews, secondary data, and observation notes. The analysis performed by the researchers was fully approved by the managers interviewed, lending greater credibility to the results.

4 | Findings

Data analysis reveals how companies use socio-environmental marketing differently for different audiences, each facing specific challenges. Communication is primarily aimed at attracting investors and strengthening brand image. At the same time, sales strategies for end consumers vary, with notable success in cases that successfully connect socio-environmental actions to perceived customer value. The following findings are derived from the coding scheme outlined in Appendix A (see Table A1).

4.1 | Investor Attraction

The analyzed companies' socio-environmental communications aim to attract investors and improve their brand image. Most of these messages are broadcast on limited-reach media, such as institutional websites, which are targeted at a specialized audience, including the financial market. The initiatives communicated cover a wide range of actions, such as:

- Environmental: Investments in renewable energy, contribution to the circular economy through reverse logistics programs and returnable packaging, water efficiency, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, use of sustainable packaging, and support for sustainable agriculture and preservation of biomes.
- Social: Promoting diversity, combating stereotypes, and adopting inclusive language.

This strategic communication aims to attract investors, including those focused exclusively on financial returns. The rationale is to demonstrate that ESG practices can lead to reduced operating costs, such as those resulting from greater energy efficiency or better waste management. Improved financial results, in turn, help attract capital to finance product and process innovation.

> As incredible as it may seem, a good socio-environmental image can help a company attract investors interested only in the financial aspect.

> The returnable packaging policy reduces plastic in landfills, pleasing conscious investors.

> Only the association between socio-environmental issues and higher sales and profits can reduce investor skepticism about these stocks!

4.2 | Consumer Sales

Most companies sell through conventional marketing strategies. Although socio-environmental communication to the general public is rarer, two successful strategies have been identified for boosting sales through socio-environmental initiatives.

The First is the cosmetics company, which stands out for running campaigns in broad-reaching media about its social and environmental contributions. Triangulation indicates that the company focuses on everything from contributions to underserved communities (including female entrepreneurship) to the sustainable extraction of raw materials. The success of this approach is tied to its business model, which relies on independent sales consultants. These consultants act as a crucial link between the company and consumers, translating sustainability messages (extraction of rare raw materials, respect for biodiversity, and fair trade) into added value, which helps justify higher prices and mitigate price wars. The consultants' relationships with their client networks enhance the image of a company that supports female entrepreneurship, mitigating price wars.

The second strategy is to associate the product with a highly appealing social cause: in the case of cosmetics sold by another of the companies investigated (Cleaning), promoting female self-esteem and challenging beauty standards. This campaign allows the company to charge prices 10% to 20% higher than those of a significant global competitor for a similar product. Field observations conducted by the researchers in retail during the triangulation phase confirmed these figures. Despite the higher price, product sales grew by more than 7% in the last year, indicating that the campaign generated perceived value that transcends the product's technical quality and protects the brand from price-based competition.

> A cosmetics consultant sells to friends and family, boosting the company's image as a women-friendly company and mitigating the competition's price war.

> This company supports women's self-esteem, challenges stereotypes, and generates profitable sales.

> The cosmetic is 10%–20% more expensive than a similar product from a major global competitor!

4.3 | The Challenges of the Unengaged

Corporate failures or negative cases in socio-environmental marketing were also identified. It was found that attempts to generate sales based on this marketing type were ineffective. Overcoming this barrier does not appear to be easy. The findings suggest that the main challenge of socio-environmental marketing lies in its limited ability to influence the behavior of "disengaged" consumers. These consumers constitute most of the market, thus dictating the companies' marketing strategies. For this group, traditional marketing factors, such as price, product attributes, and emotional associations, remain the primary purchase motivators. For example, in the case of beer, successful marketing exploits purchase motivators related to happiness and friendship. In the case of banks, it taps into consumer trust in the solidity and security of the institution, as well as the ethical use of money. In the case of the telephone company, it taps into the guarantee of a high-quality and reliable connection. In the case of yogurt, it taps into concrete health benefits, flavor, and texture. Consequently, the companies under investigation face great difficulty justifying higher prices based on their socio-environmental contributions, as other elements remain decisive.

This reality creates a dilemma for marketers, who express apprehension about innovating due to doubts about approaching disengaged audiences without incurring risks to consumers, more aligned with a different line of thought or way of life. The interviewees mentioned the case of a large international company that tried to promote diversity and faced challenges with more traditional consumers, who reduced their product consumption. The researchers confirmed this case through an analysis of online documents (Myers 2023). As suggested, the central concern is defining messages that can effectively convert "disengaged" consumers into "engaged" ones, knowing that replicating successful strategies in other contexts may not work. The future of socio-environmental marketing appears to depend on companies' ability to identify market segments and messages that can be leveraged without risk, transforming socio-environmental value into a driver of sales and profit beyond the niche of already engaged consumers.

> I don't know of any marketing campaign that has convinced beer consumers to reconsider their price preferences. And these consumers make up the majority of the market!

> How can we convert the unengaged into engaged ones without risking the company's image among consumers who are more aligned with a different line of thought?

> The future of socio-environmental marketing depends on the success of sales to consumers who currently prefer competition based on price.

Table 4 presents a summary of the findings.

TABLE 4 | Practices, gains and challenges of socio-environmental marketing.

Code	Practices, gains and challenges
Investor attraction	Communication about social and environmental initiatives is primarily directed to investors through limited channels, such as company websites. The goal is to attract capital by demonstrating that ESG practices can reduce costs and improve financial results, thus attracting investors, including those focused solely on economic performance.
Consumer sales and profits	Most companies sell through conventional marketing strategies. The cosmetics company succeeds by combining general-purpose campaigns with a network of sales consultants who justify the premium price and protect the brand from price wars. The cleaning company associated its product with a social cause (female self-esteem), which allowed it to charge prices 10% to 20% higher than its competitors while increasing sales volume.
The challenges of the unengaged	Social and environmental marketing has limited influence on "disengaged" consumers, who comprise most of the market and prioritize traditional factors. Companies struggle to justify higher prices based on their social and environmental contributions to disengaged consumers. Marketers are wary of innovating because they don't know how to convert these "disengaged" consumers without incurring risks, and they lack clarity about the messages and segments to target.

5 | Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the complex ways large companies use socio-environmental marketing to boost results in an adverse environment marked by high costs, consumer skepticism, and sometimes inconsistent financial results. The analysis reveals distinct strategies for attracting investors and capturing consumers, and the persistent challenge of engaging a "disengaged" audience.

5.1 | Investors Attraction

The study's results demonstrate that most companies use social and environmental marketing solely to attract investors. To this end, communication about ESG initiatives encompasses investments in renewable energy, the circular economy, emissions reduction, and support for biomes, as well as social actions such as promoting diversity. This communication targets a specialized audience, often through limited channels like institutional websites. The goal is to convince investors that ESG practices are not merely a cost, but a strategic value driver. This perception aligns with the literature suggesting that CSR initiatives are driven by better financial performance and reduced capital costs (AL-Akheli et al. 2025). The findings contribute to this literature by detailing how companies proactively communicate that ESG lowers operating costs and drives better financial results, which is crucial to mitigating the negative impact that high ESG performance can have on cash reserves (Chen et al. 2025). A better understanding of how this "good image" is converted into financial capital can increase resources for green innovation reputation (Arhinful et al. 2025) and companies' socially responsible actions, facilitating senior management engagement (Li et al. 2025). This engagement is essential to increasing attention to social and environmental actions.

However, the literature does not indicate how to improve social and environmental marketing to attract investors focused solely on financial results. This study suggests that successful acquisition can significantly leverage the financing of social and ecological actions. Another gap is our limited understanding of attracting investors focused on financial results who value social and environmental causes. Greater acquisition of these small investors can mitigate the negative impact of some ESG actions on cash reserves (Chen et al. 2025), helping to engage senior management (Li et al. 2025).

5.2 | Consumer Sales and Profits

The findings indicate that the cosmetics company offers valuable lessons by conducting far-reaching campaigns about its social and environmental contributions. However, its success appears to be intrinsically linked to its business model, which uses door-to-door sales consultants. Supported by mainstream media communications, these consultants translate ESG messages—such as sustainable raw material sourcing, respect for biodiversity, support for underserved communities, and fair trade—into perceived added value, which helps justify higher prices. This approach is an alternative for building a more resilient market position through robust product and brand strategies in a highly price-sensitive environment (Luengo-Valderrey et al. 2022). The findings also contribute to the literature by demonstrating that socio-environmental marketing can, in fact, generate direct sales and profits, not just attract investors. To this end, elements such as consumers' "green self-identity" (Confente et al. 2020) and "green brand trust" (Rahman and Nguyen-Viet 2023; Riva et al. 2024) are enhanced by consultants' personal connections, which helps justify premium prices. This possibility points to a new path for financing large companies' improvement and expansion of social and environmental causes, namely the alignment between purpose and profit (Papadas et al. 2024).

The cleaning company's case (which also sells cosmetics in supermarkets and pharmacies) offers a distinct perspective on social and environmental marketing. By associating its product with a highly compelling social cause—promoting women's self-esteem and challenging beauty standards—the company could charge prices 10% to 20% higher than a global competitor, with sales growth of over 7%. This strategy suggests customer service can increase sales and profits in mass-market retail channels. The findings indicate that the socially-focused campaign generated perceived value that transcended the product's technical quality, protecting the brand from price-based competition. These findings contribute to the literature by suggesting a new way to value social and environmental contributions through emotional and social appeals (Nascimento and Maria Correia Loureiro 2024; Yeo et al. 2022), even in an adverse environment where price sensitivity is high (Luengo-Valderrey et al. 2022). Authentic communication, combined with a relevant social cause, appears to overcome consumer skepticism (Kolling et al. 2023) and justify a higher premium.

5.3 | The Challenges of the Unengaged

Despite these successes, the discussion highlights the central challenge of socio-environmental marketing: its limited ability to influence the behavior of "disengaged consumers," who constitute the majority of the market. For this group, traditional marketing factors such as price and traditional attributes (such as happiness in the case of beer) remain the primary purchase motivators. This finding contributes to revealing a crucial challenge for socio-environmental researchers: how to engage consumers who define their purchasing choices based on values other than socio-environmental ones, especially when "price" is a dominant factor in times of crisis (Luengo-Valderrey et al. 2022). The study also contributes to revealing marketers' apprehension about innovating for these audiences without risking the company's image—as in the case of a large international company that faced challenges promoting diversity with more traditional consumers—underscoring the need for a greater understanding of unsuccessful socio-environmental marketing initiatives (Amankwah-Amoah 2024). A better understanding of this gap, through the identification of safe messages and segments (De Silva et al. 2021), can boost sales and profits (Pontes et al. 2024), helping to engage the most skeptical executives (Li et al. 2025), transforming socio-environmental value into a sales and profit driver beyond the already engaged niche.

6 | Conclusion

This study explored the question "How do large companies use socio-environmental marketing to boost results in an adverse environment?", providing an in-depth analysis of the strategies adopted and the persistent challenges. The qualitative and exploratory research used interviews with marketing managers and analysis of public documents to build a multifaceted understanding of the phenomenon. The conclusion summarizes the main theoretical contributions and managerial implications, addresses the study's limitations, and suggests future research directions.

6.1 | Theoretical Contributions

The findings of this study enrich the existing literature in several ways:

- *Detailed ESG Communications for Investors*: The study details how companies proactively communicate ESG practices (investments in renewable energy, circular economy, emissions reduction, support for biomes, and social actions such as promoting diversity) to a specialized audience, primarily through limited-reach channels such as institutional websites. This communication is strategically designed to convince investors, including those focused on financial returns, that ESG reduces operating costs (e.g., energy efficiency, waste management) and drives better economic results, mitigating the negative impact on cash reserves. This finding advances understanding of how a good socio-environmental image translates into financial capital, potentially increasing resources for green innovation and socially responsible actions.
- *Social and Environmental Marketing as a Direct Generator of Sales and Profits*: Research shows that social and environmental marketing can, in fact, generate direct sales and profits, not just attract investors. The success of the cosmetics company, for example, demonstrated how combining wide-reaching campaigns with a business model based on independent sales consultants translates sustainability messages into perceived added value, justifying higher prices and mitigating price wars. This personal connection enhances consumers' "green self-identity" and "trust in the green brand," which points to a new way to fund social and environmental causes by aligning purpose and profit.
- *Social Cause Valuation in Mass Retail*: The study offers a new perspective by showing how a cleaning company (also a cosmetics company) was able to charge premium prices and increase sales in mass retail channels by associating its product with a highly compelling social cause—promoting women's self-esteem and challenging beauty standards. This conclusion demonstrates that emotional and social appeals can transcend a product's technical quality and price sensitivity in adverse scenarios, overcoming consumer skepticism and justifying a premium.
- *Identifying the Critical Challenge of "Disengaged" Consumers*: The research reveals a crucial challenge for the literature by highlighting the limited capacity of socio-environmental marketing to influence the behavior of "disengaged" consumers, who constitute the majority of the market and prioritize traditional factors such as price and product attributes. This finding highlights the gap in understanding how to innovate for these audiences without risking the company's image, reinforcing the need to identify safe messages and segments to leverage sales and profits beyond the niche of already engaged consumers.

6.2 | Dialogue With Foundational Theories

This study's findings offer a richer understanding when interpreted through established organizational and marketing theories. They directly address the complex interplay between corporate actions and market perceptions.

First, the results may corroborate and extend Stakeholder Theory. The clear distinction between communication strategies for investors and consumers exemplifies the core challenge of balancing the divergent demands of different stakeholder groups (ElGammal et al. 2018; Freeman and Reed 1983). While investors (a key stakeholder group) are targeted with messages emphasizing financial returns and cost reduction from ESG practices, the majority of consumers (another critical stakeholder) remain "disengaged," prioritizing traditional attributes. This tension highlights the practical difficulty of what de Menezes et al. (2022) call delivering value to diverse stakeholders with varying priorities, forcing companies into a cautious and segmented approach to socio-environmental marketing 3.

Second, the successful cases of the cosmetics and cleaning companies provide a vivid illustration of Brand Identity Theory. According to this theory, a company must strategically build a unique and desirable identity that it projects to the market, shaping the external brand image (Aaker 1996). The cleaning company's campaign, which associated the product with female self-esteem, was not merely a promotion but a deliberate act of crafting a brand identity centered on empowerment. This identity, successfully translated into brand image, allowed the company to transcend price-based competition and create a perceived value strong enough to justify a premium price, demonstrating how a well-defined identity can become a significant financial asset.

Finally, the apprehension of marketers and the persistent challenge of engaging the mainstream market can be explained by Institutional Theory. This theory posits that organizations conform to norms and rules within their environment to gain legitimacy and ensure survival (Dimmagio and Powell 1983). The companies in this study face competing institutional pressures: on one hand, the growing institutional norm to adopt and communicate ESG practices to appear legitimate to investors and regulators; on the other, the powerful market-based pressure from "disengaged" consumers who enforce a logic where price and traditional attributes are paramount. This duality seems to create a strategic paradox, forcing companies to adopt ESG superficially for one audience while maintaining conventional marketing for another, reflecting a struggle between normative pressures and the practical realities of the consumer market.

6.3 | Managerial Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable practical insights for managers seeking to integrate socio-environmental marketing into their strategies:

- *Targeted Communication for Investors*: Managers should focus on better messages to proactive, data-driven communication about the financial benefits of ESG practices, using specialized channels (institutional websites, reports) to demonstrate the reduction in operating costs and the positive impact on financial results, aiming to attract capital and validate senior management engagement. Developing initiatives that attract small investors focused on financial results and social and environmental contributions can increase the importance of ESG for companies.
- *Hybrid Models for Consumer Sales*: For direct sales contributions, companies consider business models that enable personal connections, such as networks of independent sales consultants. These intermediaries translate sustainability messages into added value, justifying premium prices, and building brand resilience against price wars.
- *Leveraging Relevant Social Causes in Mass Retail*: In mass retail products, it's crucial to associate the brand with social causes that are emotionally appealing and relevant to the target audience. This association can create perceived value that transcends the product's technical attributes, justifying higher prices and increasing sales volume, provided the communication is authentic enough to overcome consumer skepticism.
- *Cautious Strategies for "Disengaged" Consumers*: Recognizing that most consumers still prioritize traditional attributes is crucial. Managers should be cautious when innovating for these audiences, investing in research to identify safe messages and segments that allow them to convert socio-environmental value into a differentiator for sales and profit, without alienating consumers with different perspectives or creating risks to the company's image. The initial emphasis can be on communicating direct product benefits or price, where applicable, to this segment.

6.4 | Limitations

This study has some limitations inherent to its approach:

- *Qualitative and Exploratory Nature*: Being a qualitative and exploratory study, without a specific theory as a basis, its findings, although rich in details, are not directly generalizable to all large companies or sectors.
- *Sector Focus*: The selection of companies in specific sectors (processed foods, banking, beverages, cleaning products, cosmetics, and telecommunications) may limit the direct applicability of the findings to other sectors with different market and consumer dynamics.
- *Interviewee Selection Criteria*: Choosing executives who left their companies no more than 4 years ago and the condition that they not talk about their current company may have introduced bias, limiting the collection of information about the most recent or ongoing strategies.

6.5 | Further Search

Based on the contributions and limitations, future research may follow the following directions:

- *Quantitative and Comparative Studies*: To test the validity and generalizability of the identified strategies, quantitative studies on larger samples, covering different sectors and geographies, could investigate the relationship between socio-environmental marketing, price, and consumer behavior.
- *Deepening Engagement with "Disengaged" Consumers*: Future research is crucial to further identify safe messages, channels, and segments for these consumers. This includes investigating innovative approaches that overcome price barriers and skepticism without compromising brand image, as well as analyzing the reasons behind "unsuccessful social and environmental marketing initiatives" for this group.
- *Optimizing the Attraction of Financial Investors*: It is necessary to investigate how socio-environmental marketing can be improved to attract investors who prioritize only financial results, detailing the mechanisms and communication that convert "good image" into tangible financial capital.
- *Comparative Analysis of Business Models*: Studies can compare the impact of different sales models (e.g., direct sales by consultants vs. mass retail vs. e-commerce) on the effectiveness of socio-environmental marketing and the justification of premium prices for sustainable products.
- *Trust-Building Mechanisms*: Investigate the communication dynamics that genuinely build "green brand trust" and overcome consumer skepticism, moving beyond mere transparency to focus on stronger, more credible signaling efforts.
- *Cultural Impact and Adaptability of Strategies*: Conduct cross-cultural studies to understand how the factors that influence green consumption vary across cultures and how socio-environmental marketing strategies can be adapted to maximize global impact.

By exploring these avenues, future research can consolidate the strategic role of socio-environmental marketing, transforming it into a consistent driver of sales and profit for large companies, even in challenging scenarios, and contributing to a more sustainable future.

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Appendix A

Table A1 presents the coding of the findings.

TABLE A1 | Coding of findings.

Initial coding	Identification and selection of themes	Coding and identification of themes
Communication primarily directed to investors through limited channels. The goal is to attract capital by demonstrating that ESG practices can reduce costs and improve financial results.	Investor attraction	How large companies use socio-environmental marketing to boost results in an adverse scenario
Most companies sell through conventional marketing strategies. The cosmetics company succeeds by combining general-purpose campaigns with a network of sales consultants who justify the premium price and protect the brand from price wars. The cleaning company associated its product with a social cause (female self-esteem), which allowed it to charge prices 10% to 20% higher than its competitors while increasing sales volume.	Consumer sales and profits	
Social and environmental marketing has limited influence on “disengaged” consumers, who comprise most of the market and prioritize traditional factors. Companies struggle to justify higher prices based on their social and environmental contributions to disengaged consumers. Marketers are wary of innovating because they don't know how to convert these “disengaged” consumers without incurring risks, and they lack clarity about the messages and segments to target.	The challenges of the unengaged	