

LOW ECONOMY AND SDGS, ESG, AND PRI IMPLEMENTATION: A STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND BRAND BUILDING

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Abstract

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The aim of this paper is to increase the awareness of educators, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and managers in business and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that the key elements for outstanding corporate responsible investment are brand building with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), environmental, social, and governance (ESG), and United Nations Principles of Responsible Investment (UN PRI), incorporate PRI policy into corporations, and disclosure of ESG issues. To critically identify their relationship to the topic, by using NVivo, a text search was performed for the mentioned keywords. This is managerially relevant to organizations which are working on SDGs, ESG and PRI for corporate brand building. Based on the quantitative analysis of environmental materials on school uniforms of ESG School HK in Hong Kong and the focus group interviews in July 2024 and October 2024, it is further illustrated that technology may be applied for responsible and transparent product/service workflow for responsible investment. A validation model is needed to link up with the findings of this paper for improving organizational performance and brand building.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs, Environmental, Social, Governance, ESG, Principles for Responsible Investment, PRI, Brand Building

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1. INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry, a major player in the global economy, is closely linked with environmental and social implications, making sustainable apparel an increasingly vital focus. Stakeholders in the apparel sector, including manufacturers, retailers, consumers, and policymakers, play crucial roles in driving sustainable practices. This discourse examines the trends in educating these stakeholders about Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3: Good Health and Well-being, 4: Quality Education, and 12: Responsible Consumption and Production.

Furthermore, it integrates the principles of the United Nations Principles for Responsible Management Education (UNPRME) initiative, particularly the five principles, to elucidate how educational frameworks can be structured to promote sustainable practices in the apparel industry.

The apparel industry is notorious for its significant environmental footprint and social challenges, including poor working conditions, labor exploitation, and immense waste generation. According to statistics from the United Nations (UN, 2023), the fashion industry contributes approximately 10% of global carbon emissions and produces 20% of

wastewater. Moreover, unsustainable production methods heavily impact workers' health, thus connecting SDG 3 to the agenda of sustainable apparel.

SDG 12 highlights the need for sustainable consumption and production patterns, compelling businesses to rethink their practices, from raw material sourcing to end-of-life product disposal. To create a responsible and sustainable apparel industry, educating stakeholders is essential. This preparation involves disseminating knowledge about sustainable practices, healthful production, and consumption habits.

The aim of this paper is to increase the awareness of educators, entrepreneurs, policymakers and management in business and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that the key elements for outstanding corporate responsible investment are brand building with SDGs, environmental, social, and governance (ESG), and UN Principles of Responsible Investment (PRI), incorporate PRI policy into corporations, and disclosure of ESG issues.

The rest of the paper is divided into four sections. Section 2 includes the theoretical background. Section 3 describes the data and research method. Section 4 presents and discusses the results. Section 5 concludes the study.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Stakeholders and their roles

The primary stakeholders in the sustainable apparel sector include consumers, manufacturers, retailers, policymakers, and educational institutions. Each group has a unique role and influence within the industry:

- Consumers: As end-users, consumers can drive change through their purchasing decisions. Awareness campaigns can educate them about sustainable choices.
- Manufacturers: They are responsible for the production processes and can be educated about eco-friendly materials and energy-efficient methods.
- Retailers: Retailers can promote sustainable brands and educate consumers regarding responsible consumption.
- Policymakers: They can implement regulations and incentives that promote sustainable practices within the industry.
- Educational institutions: They can incorporate sustainability into academic programming, training future leaders in responsible practices.

2.2. UN Sustainable Development Goals: Education and health

SDG 3 focuses on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages. The connection between sustainable apparel and health is from consumer and health perspectives to avoid adverse health outcomes.

Quality education is important, especially in understanding the materials used in the apparel industry for health. Also, decision-making towards sustainability relies on an understanding of materials and production processes.

UN SDG 12 emphasizes the need for sustainable consumption and production patterns. Educators and producers play an important role in this aspect, encouraging stakeholders to adopt more sustainable practices for a better community. Stakeholders can be educated through ongoing labelling education and workshops on materials understanding.

The UNPRME initiative consists of seven principles (values, purpose, teach, research, partner, practice, and share) aimed at fostering responsible management education¹. By integrating these principles into the mission, production processes and consumer education, the apparel industry can pave the way for sustainable practices. For example:

- Integrating seven UNPRME principles for interdisciplinary curriculum: Educational programs are increasingly adopting interdisciplinary approaches, combining fashion, business and sustainability to equip stakeholders with a better understanding of the challenges and solutions in the sustainable apparel industry.
- Organizing ongoing sustainable workshops and certification programs: Educating professionals and front-line workers in the apparel industry with competence and individual certification for professionalism in sustainable practices.

2.3. UN Principles of Responsible Investment on sustainable school uniforms

As organizations increasingly recognize the importance of sustainability via SDG and ESG, it is time to explore adding the UN PRI into the apparel industry, for example, school uniforms for responsible production and investment. Besides, incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) in the recycling and upcycling processes in the apparel industry may also improve the transparency and traceability of workflow and enhance operational efficiency. This paper aims to discuss the skills and jobs needed for implementing these sustainable practices, as well as the implications for corporate trust and policy development in sustainability initiatives.

The UN PRI provides a framework for incorporating ESG factors into investment decisions. In the context of sustainable apparel, including school uniforms, the principles encourage investors to hold companies accountable for their sustainability practices. This approach ensures that schools and parents make responsible purchasing decisions, supporting brands committed to ethical production and practices. As brands adopt these principles, they can effectively build trust with consumers and improve their corporate reputation.

Skills and jobs needed for sustainability implementation:

1) Sustainability managers:

- *Skills*: Strong understanding of sustainable practices, project management, and compliance with regulations. Sustainability managers are responsible for developing and implementing sustainability strategies within organizations.
- *Role*: Oversee the integration of sustainable materials and practices in the design and production of uniforms.

¹ <https://www.unprme.org/what-we-do/>

2) Data analysts:

- **Skills:** Proficient in data management and analysis, strong statistical knowledge, and AI tool proficiency. Data analysts focus on interpreting data to drive decision-making.

- **Role:** Analyze consumer behaviors and preferences regarding sustainable uniforms, as well as assess the effectiveness of recycling programs through AI systems.

3) AI engineers:

- **Skills:** Expertise in machine learning, software development, and knowledge of recycling/upcycling processes. AI engineers create and refine algorithms that aid in the efficiency of recycling and upcycling processes.

- **Role:** Develop AI systems that enhance the effectiveness of recycling and upcycling in the uniform supply chain.

4) Sourcing specialists:

- **Skills:** Negotiation, supply chain management, and knowledge of sustainable materials. Sourcing specialists research and procure materials that are sustainable and ethical.

- **Role:** Work with suppliers to source eco-friendly materials and technologies that align with sustainability goals.

5) Circular economy experts:

- **Skills:** Knowledge of circular economy principles, material recycling technologies, and environmental regulations. These experts focus on minimizing waste and maximizing resource efficiency.

- **Role:** Advise on the transition from traditional linear production methods to circular practices that reduce waste.

6) Marketing professionals:

- **Skills:** Strategic thinking, communication skills, and expertise in digital marketing trends. Marketers must understand consumer perceptions regarding sustainability.

- **Role:** Develop branding and communication strategies that emphasize the sustainable aspects of the uniforms and the brand's commitment to responsible investment principles.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Communication is to send literary messages — verbal and non-verbal for co-ordinating, joining, controlling and influencing purposes. Subsequently, printed messages are apparatuses for inducing people's minds to acknowledge thoughts. Organizational behavior is to obtain, anticipate, and control others' behavior. Administration is to oversee assets inside an organization for accomplishing organizational objectives. These three standards — commerce communication, organization behavior, and commerce administration — bear an inter-related relationship.

Literary messages are information for conducting substance examination amid the method of grounded hypothesis which makes a difference in us to initiate a concept for generalization and future expectation. From the taking after citation, ready to realize that substance examination may be a strategy to empower analysts to ponder human behavior in a circuitous way. It is an examination of composed substance drawn from a certain kind of communication paper, like reading material,

expositions and articles from daily papers. Through analyzing these composed work of individuals, the analyst can:

- get it the behavior of individuals and organizational designs;
- gather states of mind, values and social designs in numerous nations or organizations;
- pick up thoughts of how organizations are seen;
- can see the slant of certain hones;
- separate hones among certain bunches of individuals.

Content examination as a strategy is regularly utilized in conjunction with other strategies, in specific chronicled and ethnographical inquiries. It can be utilized in any setting in which the analyst wants a implies of systematise and evaluate information. It is amazingly profitable in analysing perception and meeting data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

Substance examination could be an orderly and objective examination of chosen content characteristics. This incorporates checking the number, and frequency of words, finding out the characteristics of themes, and characters, building relationships among items, paragraphs, at long last building up important concepts. It isn't basically a quantitative investigative strategy but moreover, a subjective one as the reason for the composing is additionally reflected through the investigation.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Stage 1: Qualitative analysis

The Low Touch Economy (Board of Innovation, 2020, as cited in Baghiu, 2020) and UN SDG 12.6 (encourage companies to adopt sustainable practices and sustainability reporting) with a sustainability report for disclosure have become a fad under COVID-19 for a kind of business model with responsibility and sustainability. Not only the producers, but also the consumers are concerned as our lives are affected by the issues of safety, hygiene, technology, income generation, level of happiness and harmony. The implementation of the SDGs since 2015 has been moving from a global scale into a local scale with impacts and actions, for example, the selected targets under SDG 12 which focuses on:

- encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle;
- promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities.

Robeyns (2005) mentioned that "the capability approach is a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in society" (p. 93). The author quoted the ideas of economist Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum that human well-being may be evaluated based on capabilities, meaning what people do or are and what they are able to do or to be. It is time to explore the key attributes of a capable leader for change under COVID-19, for example, transformative business servant leadership.

“Capabilities are oriented towards the kind of life that people, upon reflection, find valuable. This aim, as well as the capabilities themselves, depends on the cultural context and on the capital (human, produced, natural, financial, and social) available to the individual. By realizing capabilities through the implementation of strategies (or by turning capabilities into achieved functionings, to use Sen’s language), needs get met and well-being arises” (Rauschmayer et al., 2011, p. 7).

Based on the above, an interview has been conducted with Mr. Paul Chan, chief amusement officer (CAO) of Hanin Enterprises Limited, on integrating ESG and SDG into their apparel business under COVID-19 and post COVID-19.

“We have changed from design-make-sell into design-sell-make to ensure demand is predicted without creating unnecessary waste. And, we have partnered with Biotech experts for SDG 3 wellness to provide a quality coating on apparel items to effectively inactivate bacteria including coronaviruses”, mentioned Mr. Paul Chan (personal communication, July 29, 2024).

The latest biotechnology BioNTex antiviral uniforms of ESG School HK, Hanin Enterprises Limited, — is one of their transformations to increase the confidence of corporate clients and end-users. The BioNTex has been certified by the authoritative organization SGS. For SDG 12, Mr. Paul Chan mentioned that understanding the market trend with a focus on reducing waste and improving sales via:

- stock reduction, making when sales are secured;
- flexibility in discount offers, making the sales closed at a profitable margin;
- extension of a product life cycle, making the materials recycled and upcycled with appealing colors and the possibility of carbon trading in the report related to SDG/ESG for transparency, responsibility and sustainability.

The sharing of Mr. Paul Chan is well aligned with the research findings of the author. A recent study by the author (Yeung, 2021) was conducted to explore the factors relating to intellectual property in transformative business. A literature search was done on the research papers published between 2004 and 2021. Seven papers were found. After reviewing the papers, several factors appeared to relate to the topic which included outstanding products or services for sustainable business, creating a perceivable differentiated market, intellectual property and unique features. To further examine their relevancy to the topic, a text search using the above factors as keywords was carried out with NVivo. Findings revealed that some factors such as outstanding products or services for sustainable business and creating perceivable differentiated markets were frequently cited with 237 and 102 references, respectively, while factors that were relatively less cited were intellectual property and unique features (see Table 1).

Table 1. Findings of text search

<i>Factors</i>	<i>Sources</i>	<i>References</i>
Unique features	3	5
Outstanding products or services for sustainable business	7	237
Intellectual property	6	88
Creating a perceivable differentiated market	6	102

4.2. Stage 2: Quantitative analysis

Based on the results of 78 questionnaires, we came to the following analysis.

First of all, respondents are very concerned about school uniform-related policies, with an average score of 4.67, which shows parents’ expectations for schools’ environmental policies. Similarly, support for cooperation between schools and environmental groups is also high, with an average score of 4.65. This reflects that parents generally agree on the importance of cooperation in environmental protection. In terms of environmental protection activities, 66.67% of parents expressed support for schools to organize various types of recycling and environmental protection activities.

However, when it comes to how to improve environmentally friendly materials, the average score was only 4.35, the lowest score in this survey, indicating that there is still a lot of room for improvement in this area. Parents are most satisfied with the comfort and breathability of current school uniforms, with an average score of 5.09. In the comparison of quality and price, 83.3% of parents believe that quality is more important than price, while 64% of parents also believe that price is equally important, which shows parents’ strong demand for high-quality school uniforms.

In addition, 64.1% of parents said they lacked knowledge about environmentally friendly materials, emphasizing the need for continued community education. When evaluating the overall importance of school uniform features, Scored highest for comfort and breathability (6.28). This is followed by ease of maintenance and upkeep (5.87) and durability and product longevity (5.86). 78% of parents said they wash school uniforms every day, which shows that parents attach great importance to the hygiene of school uniforms. Finally, on the issue of parents’ willingness to pay more to buy higher-quality school uniforms, the average score was 4.66 (out of 7 points), showing that parents have a certain willingness to pay to obtain better-quality school uniforms.

Overall, the preliminary results of this survey are very positive, showing that parents attach great importance to the comfort, breathability and quality of school uniforms, and also point out the need for education and improvement of environmentally friendly materials. These results will provide a valuable reference for future school uniform design and ESG promotion.

4.3. Stage 2: Qualitative interview with focus group members

Focus group members consist of the academic sector and industry practitioners on sustainability and creative content, for example, the managing director (Archon Wellness Limited), school principal and film director from Hong Kong and Greater Bay area, information technology practitioner, NGO advisor, and publication industry practitioners from Hong Kong, artist and architect practitioner from Canada, and student.

A dedicated focus group was formed with members from different backgrounds, aiming to address one of the pressing issues of our time: the unsustainable lifecycle of clothing. It is realised that a staggering 99% of discarded clothing items end up in landfills. In a metropolitan city like Hong Kong, while the government has established various recycling policies for food, transportation, and housing, the issue of textile waste remains inadequately addressed. The focus group seeks to fill this gap and create a sustainable future for uniforms through the principles of SDG and ESG.

One common misconception is that achieving SDG and ESG goals requires significant financial outlay. During the focus group discussion, the unique blend of technology, for example, AI, blockchain, and strategic partnerships have been mentioned to help co-create sustainable solutions with a reasonable amount of costs. The objective of the focus group is to reimagine the lifecycle of uniforms by leveraging business model innovation, deeply engaging stakeholders, and utilizing advanced technologies to measure and improve our sustainability practices.

To achieve the above objective of the focus group, a multifaceted direction has been adopted. Here are the key elements that have been covered in the focus group study:

1) *Business model innovation*: We tried to explore the key workflow and related works within an organization to provide uniforms made from recycled materials in an upcycled and/or circular economy concept to enhance a unique SDG/ESG image. Additionally, online marketing strategies can be employed to reduce costs associated with traditional retail.

2) *Upcycling initiatives*: Through a committed team with an upcycling organizational policy, old uniforms can be creatively repurposed and donated to communities in need. There is good practice in Hong Kong in this area, for example, UNI Green². This helps to extend the life of the fabric and fosters a culture of contributing to building a committed community on environmental materials application with upcycled products.

3) *Stakeholder engagement*: The initiative of the focus group seeks active participation from various stakeholders, including schools, corporations, NGOs, and government entities. By involving school boards, principals, teachers, Parent Teacher Association members, and students, a collective effort can be made towards sustainable development.

4) *Technology and innovation*: Advanced technology, e.g., AI, 3D modeling, and e-commerce with blockchain and non-fungible token (NFT)

platforms may help to streamline the process of uniform related services for sustainable and functional attributes, for example, traceability of antibacterial and anti-mold properties, which extend the lifespan of the garments.

5) *Performance measurement*: Focus group members mentioned that collaboration with testing centers, for example, International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and biotechnology certification, ESG certification bodies, and the Green Council may help to verify, validate, measure, audit and monitor the situation of carbon footprint and overall environmental impact.

Furthermore, the focus group can partner with a diverse range of stakeholders and entities, including brands, hotels, enterprises, schools, NGOs, recycling, and logistics partners on uniform recycling and upcycling services and workshops. In addition, by working with art creators, it is expected that old garments can be transformed into works of art with cultural elements and aesthetic value to sustainability. Through collaborative efforts, innovative technologies, and a relentless focus on sustainable development, the sustainable uniform focus group aspires to explore acceptable and user-friendly new standards in the lifecycle management of uniforms for building a more sustainable culture in the garment/uniform industry sector.

“The role of AI in recycling and upcycling processes of the apparel industry, for example, upcycling school uniform-related products. The integration of AI and digital transformation tools can significantly enhance recycling and upcycling processes. With advancements in machine learning and AI development, companies can explore the ways of AI implementation in supply chain management processes, e.g., sorting, processing, and redesigning of materials. This is to echo the sharing of speaker, Paul Chan, ESG School HK during the focus group discussion on July 29, 2024”, said Alex Hong (personal communication, July 31, 2024).

Besides, Mr. Alex Hong has also brought up the potential applications of AI in the sustainable school uniform product lifecycle:

1) *Smart sorting technologies*: AI can facilitate the efficient sorting of recyclable and/or upcycling materials in the circular economy, ensuring that plastic drinking bottles, textiles or fabrics from recycled sweaters which have been used by the author in the recent exhibition, and other recyclables are processed correctly. This is crucial for enhancing recycling rates with a system of traceability and accountability with AI for streamlining the process ensuring of the recycled materials.

2) *Predictive analytics*: AI systems can predict trends in consumer demand, like the concepts of demand chain management for sustainable uniforms, enabling manufacturers to align their production strategies with market needs.

3) *Design optimization*: AI-powered tools can assist designers in creating multifunctional, sustainable school uniforms by suggesting eco-friendly materials and design features while minimizing waste. This has been demonstrated via the Chinese calligraphy paintings of the author in ESG School HK products.

4) *Lifecycle assessment (LCA)*: AI tools can conduct LCA more efficiently, providing insights into the environmental impact of uniforms

² <https://hksec.hk/team-management/2022-unigreen-eng/>

throughout their lifecycle — from material extraction to disposal. This data can inform future strategies for reducing the carbon footprint of products for the 2030 SDG agenda.

4.4. NVivo analysis on responsible investment and outstanding corporations

As the aim of this paper is to increase the awareness of educators, entrepreneurs, policymakers and management in business organizations and NGOs, the key elements for outstanding corporate responsible investment are going to be explored via

NVivo analysis on text search. To critically identify their relationship to the topic, a text search was performed for the mentioned keywords. This is managerially relevant to organizations which are working on SDGs, ESG, and PRI for corporate brand building. Based on the quantitative analysis of environmental materials on school uniforms of ESG School HK mentioned earlier and the focus group interview on October 23, 2024, it is further illustrated branding of corporations relies on brand building with SDG, ESG, PRI, disclosure of ESG issues, and incorporating policies of PRI with reporting (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Key elements for outstanding corporations with responsible investment

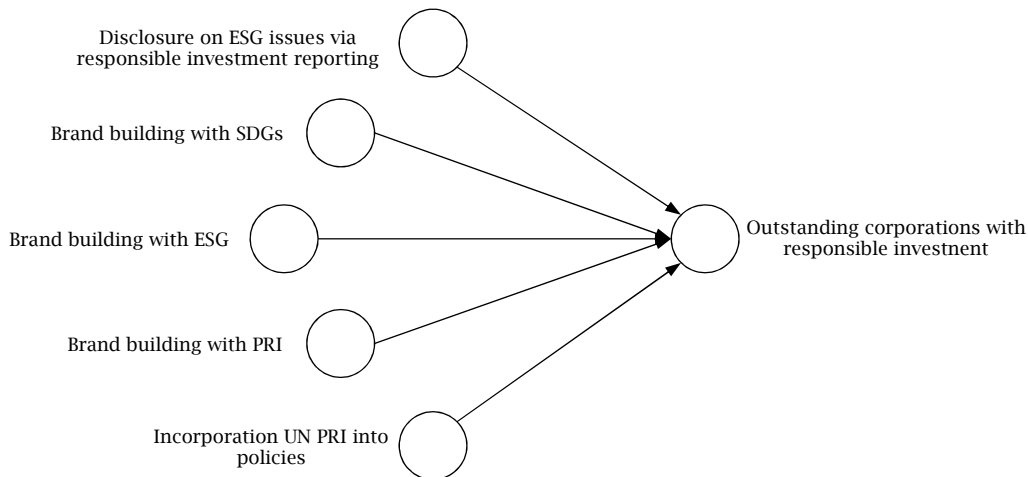


Table 2. Selected text search on five selected literature on responsible investment

Name	Sources	References
Brand building with ESG	5	585
Brand building with PRI	5	585
Brand building with SDGs	5	600
Disclosure of ESG issues via responsible investment reporting	5	1023
Incorporating UN PRI into policies	5	111

Table 3. NVivo analysis on selected text search literature on the key elements for “outstanding corporation with responsible investment”

Name	In folder	References	Coverage
Corporate social responsibility and sustainable finance: A review of the literature	Internals	337	1.66%
Canadian equities: Responsible investing report	Internals	126	1.48%
Fintech facilitates the sustainable development of green finance in China: Cases and outlook	Internals	25	0.20%
Towards a common language for sustainable investing	Internals	180	1.36%
Vision 2050 financial products & services pathway: We can all invest in our future	Internals	34	1.10%
Total		702	

Table 4. Keywords searched

Name	Nodes	References
Corporate social responsibility and sustainable finance: A review of the literature	13	2803
Canadian equities: Responsible investing report	13	1621
Fintech facilitates the sustainable development of green finance in China: Cases and outlook	13	727
Towards a common language for sustainable investing	13	2432
Vision 2050 financial products & services pathway: We can all invest in our future	13	499

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the paper is to engage qualitative NVivo analysis and focus group interviews with quantitative surveys to provide insights on the key elements of corporate brand-building via SDG, ESG, and PRI under low economy supported by a literature search. As a responsible corporation,

it is suggested to explore the ways of implementing the relevant SDGs, ESG, and PRI with survey support for building an image of responsibility and sustainability. In the future, it is recommended to study how to apply SDGs, ESG, and PRI with policies and good practices in relevant service industries related to apparel industries to create uniqueness in the market.

The integration of the UN PRI into sustainable school uniforms, along with AI technologies, represents a significant opportunity for brands to foster corporate trust and achieve policy-driven sustainability.

The commitment to the UN PRI and ESG in business operations, for example, practices of human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption with reports disclosure serves as a critical framework for organizations which are pursuing sustainable brand building for customer loyalty. By aligning business practices with the principles, organizations may gain the trust of the customers and the community. ESG School HK sets a pioneer role model on sustainable school uniforms and spent efforts in material sourcing and innovative ways of re-producing apparel products.

On top of UN PRI and ESG principles, investing in people is also an essence of brand building. Organizations need to focus on meaningful and relevant training to upscale the skills, attitudes, values and mindsets of personnel who execute these UN PRI and ESG principles in their business.

By strengthening a culture of commitment to UN PRI and ESG principles with investment in people, employees are empowered to contribute ideas and solutions that enhance sustainability. This investment in human capital not only benefits the workers with competence but also helps the organizations build process capability with brand sustained.

Furthermore, transparent and innovative supply chain management with AI elements facilitates a higher level of accountability and traceability in responsible sourcing and production processes. Brands that openly share or take corrective and preventive actions in their sustainability journey, challenges, and successes can better engage with their customers and the community, leading to loyalty.

As brand image improves through adherence to the UN PRI and ESG principles and a focus on sustainability, customer loyalty is likely to increase. With investment in people, consumers are more convinced in the image of the organizations that they respect employees, the nature and work towards a sustainable future journey.

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