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How to Use Sustainable Branding as A Unique Selling Point (USP) in a Waste Management Company? – A Case Study of Omrin

Master thesis, MSc, Sustainable Entrepreneurship
University of Groningen, Campus Fryslân

Abstract: Branding and unique selling point (USP) benefits the company in several ways, for example, advances competitiveness, increases the corporate image, and better financial performance. However, scarce literature on sustainable branding in the waste management industry, and using sustainable branding as a USP. This research conducted 7 semi-structured interviews with Omrin's employees and its customers to figure out how can Omrin use sustainable branding as a USP, and what are the prerequisites of this branding strategy. The result indicates the processes have been executed and can be improved by Omrin while using sustainable branding as a USP in the Sustainable Strategic Branding Management (SSBM) framework.

June 09, 2022

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INTRODUCTION

The activities of waste management industries are considered NIMBY (short for not-in-my-backyard) programs (Agamuthu, Khidzir & Hamid, 2009) that some people believe it might cause life quality decline in those neighborhoods (Johnson & Scicchitano, 2012). It is the paradox of citizens' call for public infrastructures but not located near their houses (Johnson & Scicchitano, 2012). The tension between citizens, local government, and waste management company amplifies (Johnson & Scicchitano, 2012) with the increased waste generation (Agamuthu, et al., 2009). Sustainable branding can be applied to change this kind of resistance by disseminating the information and image to the public or its customers to better understand the objective and maintain their relationships (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2013). For companies, hereby, brand is a powerful tool changes and spreads ideas and identity (Grubor & Milovanov, 2017).

Before branding sustainability, the need of being sustainable in the waste management industry is crucial as well. It has consequences for residents' health and well-being, the environment, and subsequently the economy (Frempong, Chai, Ampaw, Amofah & Ansong, 2020). With waste management providing the majority of end-of-pipe solutions and initiatives incorporating zero waste objectives and 100 percent diversion from disposal becoming more common, the rising value of wastes as a resource can be observed in policy management (Silva, Rosano, Stocker & Gorissen, 2017). Moreover, the waste sector is becoming more widely recognized as an important component of the sustainability agenda, necessitating more comprehensive solutions that incorporate ideas such as sustainable production and consumption, as well as the circular economy (Silva et al., 2017).

“Every organization has their own selling points that differentiate their product from among the rivalry in same industry (Jha, 2018).” In order to survive in the waste management industry, competitive strategies are needed for occupying the position as a market leader and dominant (Alam & Wulandari, 2019) to qualify them and set themselves apart from their closest competitors (Jha, 2018). The competitive edge they have with their target consumer is obvious. A unique selling point (USP) of a product or service is a feature that sets it apart from its rivals. Accolades, the lowest cost, greatest quality, first-ever, and so on, might represent the company's USP. A unique selling proposition (USP) is an excellent marketing technique for positioning and selling a product (Jha, 2018). However, neither using sustainable branding as a market strategy nor USP in waste industries has been studied or found in the previous literature. In the existing literature, sustainable branding as USP can be found in national competitiveness ranking (Hassan & Mahrous, 2019),

city management (Doyduk & Okan, 2017), and tourism (Mishra & Lenka, 2016).

Case Description

In this thesis, the subjective company, Omrin, is the largest waste collector and processor in the north of the Netherlands. “Omrin” means recycling and circular in Frisian, which states the vision of the business that they are engaging in. There are two divisions of the company, waste collector (NV Fryslân Miljeu) and waste processor (Afvalsturing Friesland NV). Originally, the company was founded by Frisian municipalities (‘gemeenten’), therefore its trade name is Frisian (‘Omrin’ meaning recycling/circle), and both divisions’ titles include the word Friesland and are owned by the shareholders, the municipalities. Omrin provides its customer services in waste management and delivers services to its shareholders as well as clients/municipalities for a minimum of 5 years contract. The division for waste processing handles 34 municipalities with 1,5 million inhabitants now, mainly in Friesland, but also Groningen, region Noord Veluwe, and region Rijnmond. For some municipalities, they are both collectors and processors, for instance, in Friesland.

As mentioned above, Omrin is active in the entire waste management chain, including the collection of household, construction, demolition, and industrial waste and cleaning of public spaces, recycling of waste, production of raw materials for various production processes, and energy generation by incineration of non-recyclable waste. Omrin aims to collect, process, and dispose of waste in a professional, innovative and sustainable way as its mission, furthermore, these activities must ensure a healthy and safe working and living environment. Moreover, Omrin tries hard to tackle 7 of the SDGs—affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, life below water, life on land, and partnership for goals (United Nations, 2015). However, the strategy of branding sustainability as its USP has not been well proposed within the business due to lack of knowledge on the implementation of using sustainable branding as Omrin’s USP.

Research Question

In light of what has been addressed above, the scarcity of using a sustainable branding strategy as a USP in the waste management industry leads to the following research question: **How to use sustainable branding as a USP in a waste management company?** In order to answer this research question, we collaborate with the largest waste management company in the northern Netherlands, Omrin. The company has two divisions, collector and processor, which are owned by the shareholders, the municipalities, and considered their USP as innovation, the frontrunner in

sustainability, circular economy and inclusive society, biodiversity, and Global Goals. With the collaboration with Omrin, we will first analyze whether it uses sustainable branding as its USP and its branding management. Once this question is answered, we will further analyze two follow-up questions that can help us to figure out the answer to the research question by comparing with Sustainable Strategy Brand Management framework (SSBM, see section 2.5): (a) **What strategies has Omrin already taken in the process of using sustainable branding as a USP?** (b) **What are the (potential) elements/preconditions and strategies in the process?** We hope to shed a light on sustainable branding as a USP process by knowing what elements does Omrin have in prior as a waste management company, what strategies could be taken, and how to attach uniqueness to sustainable branding strategies. These answers will ultimately help to review what procedures have Omrin attached USP in the SSBM and the uniqueness and prerequisites that its customers see as significant ones to assist Omrin in using sustainable branding as a USP.

This research outlines the process and the elements of sustainable branding as a USP, it contributes in two ways. First, linking the USP and sustainable branding, the final result assists the review of whether uniqueness is applicable in the current existing sustainable branding framework. Secondly, Omrin can get more understanding of how its shareholders see its sustainable branding as USP and discover potential distinctness via the interviews.

This research will be answered by the following: first, literature review, which with two main categories related to sustainable branding and USP. Next, the semi-structured interviews will be conducted with Omrin's executives and its shareholders, the municipalities. Once the data is collected and coded, the theoretical framework will be used to examine and compare with the preconditions and process of the subject. On this basis, we expect to see successful sustainable branding with USP as an element in the SSBM framework and what can Omrin do better while using sustainable branding as its USP. Finally, future research and implementation of organizational practices are suggested.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature is built on two categories, sustainable branding and Unique Selling Point (USP). However, the existing sustainable branding literature is limited, the review will first cover brand management prior to sustainable branding.

Brand Management

In the literature, brand concepts have been defined variously over time, in research and practice, based on knowledge and usage (Gerlach & Witt, 2012). According to Sammui-Bonnici (2015), “brand” is defined as “a set of tangible and intangible attributes designed to create awareness and identity, and to build the reputation of a product, service, person, place, or organization.” With the development of a brand, building a brand can be seen as a management process (Gerlach & Witt, 2012) and a strategy (Sammuli-Bonnici, 2015).

Sustainable Branding

Besides “brand”, sustainable brands have many interpretations as well, owing to the fact that people approach the notion of sustainability from various perspectives (Foroudi & Palazzo, 2021). A corporate brand that promises or contracts with sustainable development as its primary value is known as a sustainable corporate brand (Stuart, 2011). The concept of sustainable branding involves three dimensions, economy, environment, and society (Kapitan, Kennedy & Berth, 2019), in line with Foroudi & Palazzo (2021). Foroudi and Palazzo (2021) pointed out that a sustainable brand should take sustainability into consideration while operating a business to further manage the planetary resource and raise the awareness towards prosperity of the earth.

Various marketing applications may be used to ensure that sustainability becomes an inherent part of the brand; moreover, if practicable, these efforts may convert into sustainable product qualities. These initiatives should be supplemented by the disclosure of sustainability activities, including their outcomes, in business reports and specific sustainability reports (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014).

However, there are a number of criteria to consider when developing a successful sustainable brand strategy (Grubor & Milovanov, 2016), including distinctiveness, innovation, co-creation of sustainable value, and “accurate and clever communication” (Danciu, 2015, p. 53); and further, recognizing “what matters to people in their lives, how and in what direction culture is changing, how to lead rather than follow and how to ‘walk the talk’ of brand integrity” (Gordon, 2002, p. 16 as cited by Grubor & Milovanov, 2016). This has resulted in companies still struggling to clearly understand how to integrate marketing and operations for sustainable development. Kumar and Christodouloupoulou (2014) suggested that this integration can be achieved through brands. Sustainable brands must bridge the gap between firm performance and consumer perceptions in order to accomplish their stated objectives (Interbrand, 2014 as cited by Grubor & Milovanov,

2016) Companies can build and maintain relationships with sustainability-oriented customers by incorporating sustainability into their corporate practices, communicating those practices to customers, and integrating them into their brand image (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2013) and use the three dimensions of sustainability which mentioned earlier to incorporate sustainability into the context of brand building (Foroudi & Palazzo, 2021). Moreover, Ackerman (2016) has presented a sustainable brand compass and created five implementation guidelines to construct sustainable brands: “core, clear purpose, cultural connection, full use of operations, and speak (to different audiences) with one voice.”

Sustainability could provide a brand's image with a deeper meaning, resulting in stronger emotional relationships and distinction (Green, 2008; Kurowska, 2003 as cited by Grubor & Milovanov, 2016). It improves public acceptability (Kotler et al., 2005 as cited by Grubor & Milovanov, 2016), gives a firm a competitive edge (Porter & Kramer, 2006), and protects a company's financial future by lowering probable risks (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014). Empirical studies have proved that concentrating on reducing their operations' environmental effect and incorporating sustainability into branding can assist businesses to attract environmentally concerned customers and obtain a competitive strength in the marketplace (Foroudi & Palazzo, 2021).

In addition, companies can use their sustainable brand to grasp, operationalize and internalize into the market societal concerns by their sustainable brandings. The examples in Lehner and Halliday (2014), Aldi Austria, Coop Nordic, and Rewe have been aired through the broader public debate and awards. Furthermore, Kumar and Christodouloupoulou (2014) discovered that for large and sophisticated purchasers, brands are significant. Customers are prepared to abandon a valued brand if it is not transparent or environmentally sustainable, according to IBM with the National Retail Federation (Foroudi & Palazzo, 2021).

Unique Selling Point (USP)

USP refers to any feature of a product that distinguishes it from similar products (Kompaniets & Rauhut, 2013). Reeves (1961) also claims that competitors can not or do not provide the same benefits (Niu & Wang, 2016). As a result of the foregoing, we may deduce that the USP is the distinct feature that sets the brand apart from others (Wahyuni & Ali, 2019).

USP may be utilized by its distinctness to encourage growth and to successfully advertise

yourself, demonstrating your unique problem-solving abilities and allowing you to stand out from the crowd (Alexander-Passe, 2017). The necessities of USP were identified by Kompaniets and Rauhut (2013): (1) Identifying and successfully conveying its competitive advantage to "potential clients" who are seeking assistance; (2) Differentiating and positioning oneself in the target market; (3) Serving as the foundation for all types of marketing (Kotler, Asplund, Rein & Haider, 1999). Niu and Wang (2016) cite Reeves as saying that advertisers need a unique selling proposition (USP) to differentiate their products from the competition and inspire customers to buy them. **FIGURE 1** presents what form a company's USP (Thiele, 2021). These companies might offer the same products or services, but USP is the trait you have but your competitors do not or the better performance of your services and products in the market that makes those people become your customers instead of your competitors'.

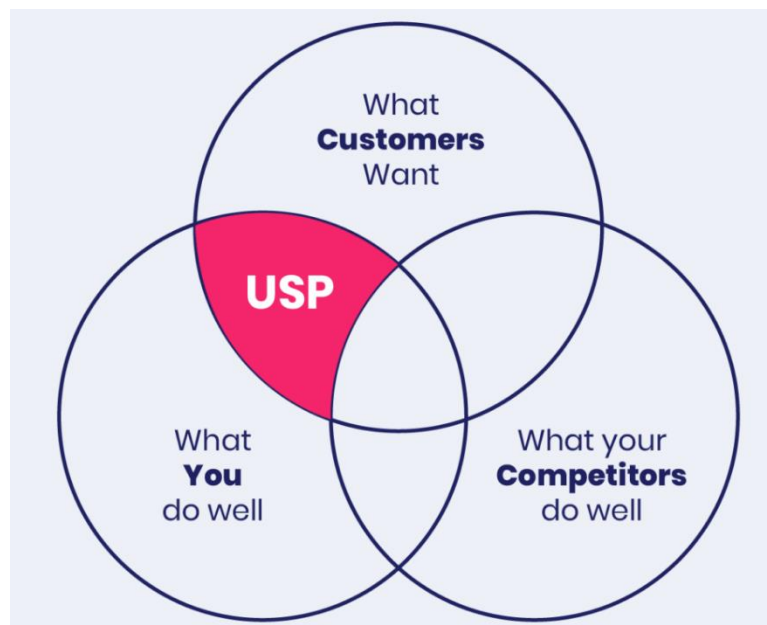


FIGURE 1

Unique selling point formation (Thiele, 2021).

Sustainable Branding as USP

As described above, USP is a unique advantage that helps a company differentiate itself from its competitors (Niu & Wang, 2016; Thiele, 2021), whereas sustainable branding contains triple bottom line as its basis (Foroudi & Palazzo, 2021; Kapitan et al., 2019) that maintain the relationship between sustainable-oriented customers (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2013) as a strength. Differentiation through sustainable branding, according to Kumar and Christodouloupoulou (2014), can lead to synergies and competitive advantage. Brands become a

well-suited instrument for firms to engage in sustainability by allowing them to "occupy" a sustainable cause (Lehner & Halliday, 2014). USP, in particular, can be utilized as a branding slogan (Petty, Leong, & Lwin, 2010 as cited by Niu & Wang, 2016).

FIGURE 2 illustrates sustainable branding as a USP by adding what the world wants—sustainable behaviors (BBMG, 2019). The Pull Factor Report written by BBMG (2019) demonstrates three categories of sustainable behaviors, climate change reversion, resource preservation, and inclusive & resilient society, as the opportunity that businesses, humans, and the earth can flourish simultaneously. Combining these ideas to the USP, using sustainable branding as a USP in a company is the traits that (1) its competitors do not have or perform better, (2) fulfill its customers' need, and (3) is sustainable. In order to answer the research question, the traits and features related to sustainability of the subjective company—Omrin and its competitors will be collated and compared.

Sustainable Strategic Brand Management (SSBM) Framework

Gerlach's and Witt's (2012) SSBM framework was mainly developed by the concept of Burmann's et.al. (2003) strategic brand management and appended sustainability as the key element in it. This research uses the framework to answer the research question. The concepts of the SSBM framework (see **FIGURE 3**)—situation analysis, company's and brand's objectives, the brand identity of the corporate brand, brand architecture, brand evolution strategy, and brand positioning are utilized to check and improve the sustainable strategic brand management process regarding adopting it as a USP simultaneously for Omrin. Furthermore, it can help the development of sustainable branding as a USP framework. **FIGURE 3** displays the sustainable brand management process and sub-processes in detail.

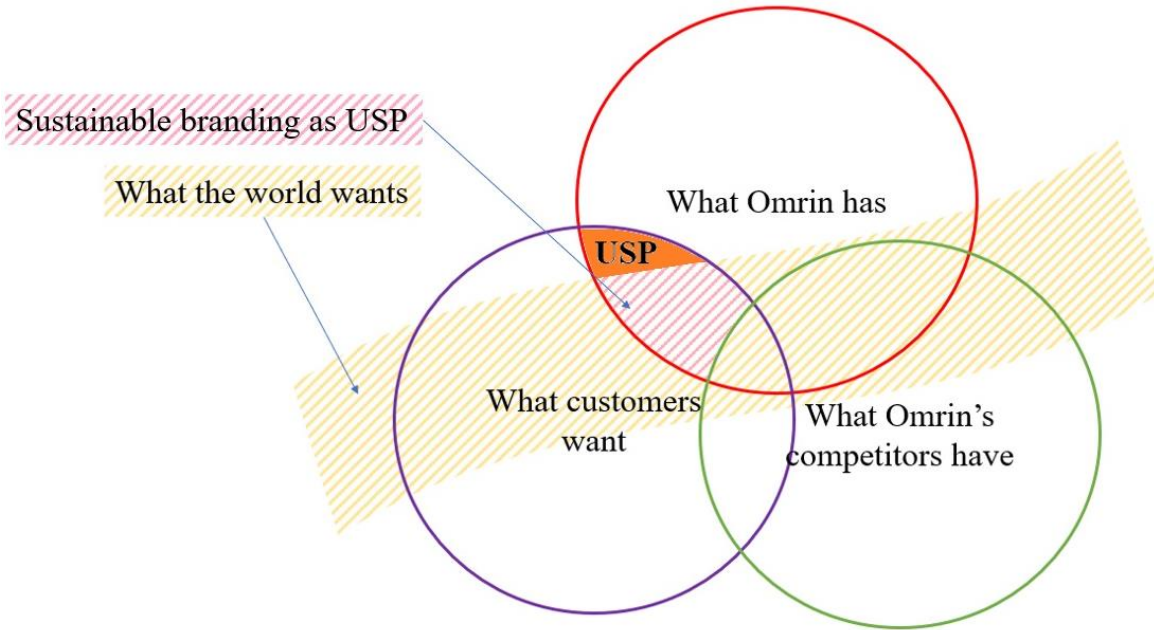


FIGURE2

Illustration of sustainable branding as a USP

Sustainable situation analysis. External analysis (outside-in-perspective) and internal analysis (inside-out-perspective) are two types of situation analysis. External analysis includes the analysis of customers, identification of brand touchpoints or points of interaction with the customer, and analysis of strengths and weaknesses of competitors on sustainability. Besides these, the legal environment, social environment, and ecological environment are considered external factors. Whereas, the internal analysis consists of actual positioning regarding sustainability, product stewardship, side effects, human resources, and identification of threats and opportunities concerning sustainability. The external and internal analyses are the foundation that affects the decision-making of the branding strategies.

Sustainable corporate and brand goals. The goals and objectives present the primary intention of a business as the itinerary and timeline to show how far the business achieve. Gerlach and Witt (2012) recommended introducing a form of sustainable guideline which is a line with the company's vision and using a mission statement to deliver its uniqueness.

Sustainable brand identity and corporate branding. The profound integration of sustainability components in the brand identity guarantees the concept of sustainability is regarded in terms of

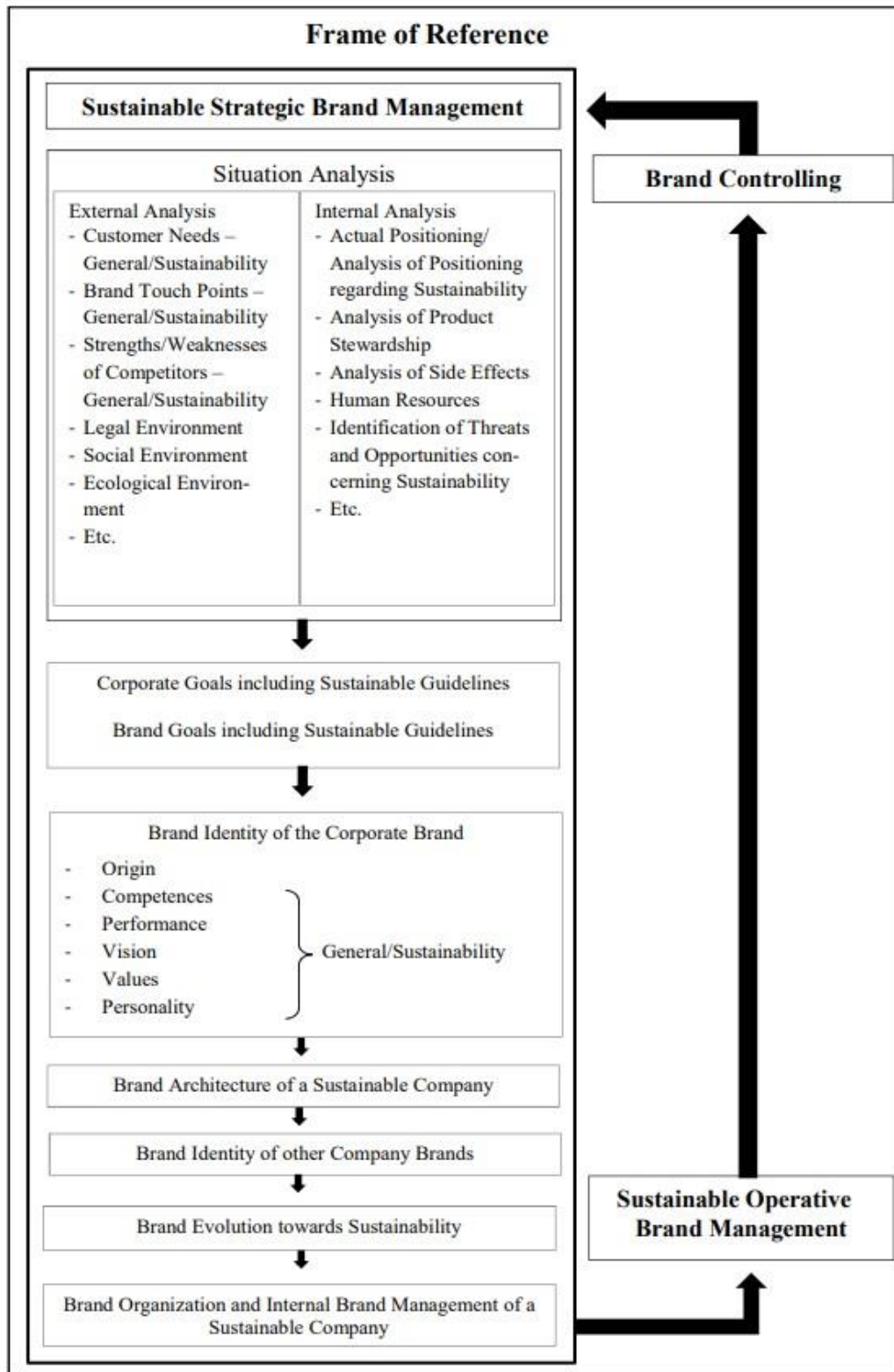


FIGURE 3

Concept of Sustainable Strategic Brand Management (Gerlach and Witt, 2012)

the claims of a holistic sustainability concept, rather than being presented in the communication superficially (Gerlach & Witt, 2012). This phase is copied with 6 components: brand's origin, competences, performance, vision, value, and personality. The sustainable aspects can be modified in all these components except the brand's origin.

Sustainable brand architecture. Brand architecture is defined by which company level the brand is located on, which roles and positions they have, and what is the relationship between the brands (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000 as cited in Gerlach & Witt, 2012). Inside vertical dimension of brand architecture: branded house¹, house of brands², sub-branding³, and endorsement branding⁴ will be taken into account to inspect what strategy Omrin utilized due to the fact of Omrin has divisions, processor and collector. However, in the horizontal dimension, there is only one service in a single categorical sector, therefore, this can be disregarded. The brand architecture may be used to determine the brand identities of other company brands, corporate division brands, and product brands prior to beginning the process of long-term strategic brand management (Gerlach & Witt, 2012).

Other brands' sustainable identity. Except for corporate brand identity, this phase is to examine whether the companies have other company or product brands. The hierarchy facilitates the differentiation regarding brand association for companies, moreover, brand positioning can establish the dominance in the market and differentiate itself capabilities from competing products. Regarding the integration of sustainability in this stage, other brands' sustainable identities should be aligned with corporate identity to further fit customers' demands and ideal image (Gerlach & Witt, 2012).

Brand evolution toward sustainability. There are two strategies to take in the brand evolution, the brand consolidation strategy and the brand expansion strategy (Gerlach & Witt, 2012). Brand consolidation is to eliminate limited corporate resources to the activities that can arise a company's competitiveness (Gerlach & Witt, 2012). For instance, it can be the withdrawal of a brand from the submarket step by step, and the introduction of the alternative brand into the market in the meanwhile. On the flip side, geographic expansion or brand extension through line extension or category extension are examples of brand expansion strategies (Gerlach & Witt, 2012). A line

¹ Corporate brand replaces the individual performance of product and company brands (Gerlach & Witt, 2012).

² What customers see is the product and company brands, but not corporate brands (Gerlach & Witt, 2012).

³ The corporate brand, or company division brand, takes precedence and is supplemented by a specialized sub-brand (Gerlach & Witt, 2012).

⁴ The product brand takes center stage, with a brief mention of the company brand (Gerlach & Witt, 2012).

extension refers to a brand's expansion into a similar or related product area, whereas a category extension refers to a brand's expansion into a new, unrelated product category (Gerlach & Witt, 2012). Out of sustainable strategic brand management, these will be a focus on sustainable projects or sustainable supply chain extension.

Brand organization and internal brand management of a sustainable company. The brand organization and internal brand management are taken into account in the final step of SSBM. In this context, the internal brand management takes responsibility for the creation of brand commitment and brand citizenship behavior, wherefore customers' personal interactions with individuals who represent the brand (employees, salespeople, and customer service representatives) can have a significant impact on the brand-customer relationship (Meffert, et.al., 2005 as cited in Gerlach & Witt, 2012). On the side of integration with sustainability, the employees believe in the sustainable value, and behave in accordance with the brand is essential for a sustainable company (Gerlach & Witt, 2012).

SSBM in the Waste Management Industry

Among all the accessible literature, sustainable branding has not been discussed in waste management, but other sustainable brand management literature can be found in other sectors, such as auto industries (Gerlach & Witt, 2012), home appliance industries (Erdil, 2013), and aviation industries (Lee & Park, 2016). These articles merely remain on sustainability (sustainable development) in the waste management industry (Agamuthu et al., 2009; Sin, Chen, Long, Goh & Hwang, 2013). The framework introduced in the previous section (section 2.5) will be used as a tool for the subjective company—Omrin, and explore what processes have been executed or not and what medium can be used while branding sustainability as a USP and the prerequisites of the implementation.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis of the research is based on a single case study in the waste management industry in the Netherlands. In order to answer how Omrin uses sustainable branding as its USP and what elements are within the process, this paper uses a cross-sectional qualitative method to collect relevant data with 7 semi-structured interviews from Omrin's internal and external stakeholders—Omrin's employees and its shareholders. The strategy of qualitative research here can assist the researcher with a better contextual understanding, and enrich the meaningful insight into the behavior or process of an individual or an organization (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

Research Design

To find out how Omrin uses sustainable branding as its USP, and what processes and preconditions it has within the procedure, two groups of participants will be interviewed. The first group is four employees in Omrin, the purpose is to understand how the corporate brands sustainability as USP, and what preconditions and uniqueness they have compared to its competitors. Another is 3 of its customers, the municipalities that collaborate with Omrin and the waste collection partner who delivers the waste to Omrin's process division, to figure out whether they consider what elements and characteristics Omrin has as the distinctness for them to choose Omrin instead of its competitors. The outcome of this research highlights the process of using sustainable branding as a USP in a waste management company by comparing the result with Sustainable Strategic Brand Management (SSBM) to extend into SSBM framework with USP (see **FIGURE 4**). This research is based on a deductive approach by appending an additional element to the existing theory and examine how USP can be applied in this framework.

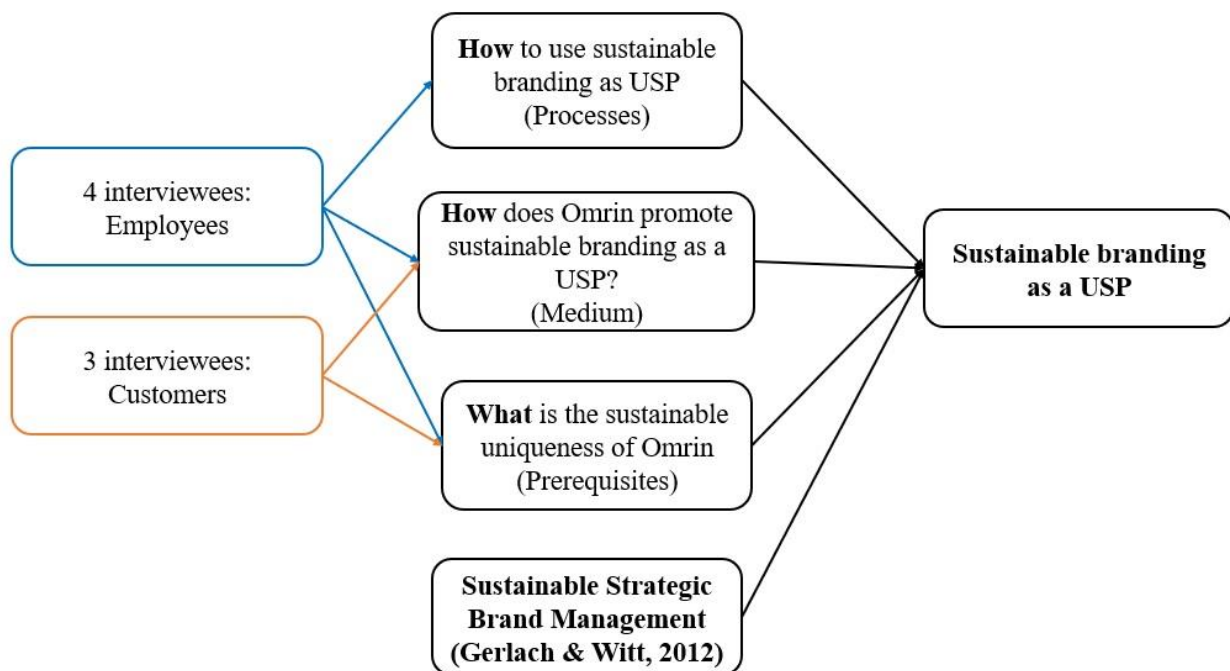


FIGURE 4

Research process design

Research Participants

The interview participants include 4 employees inside the organization, and 4 customers from 4 different regions in Friesland, Groningen, and South-Holland provinces. The employee selection criteria include: (1) work content related to sustainability and brand promotion, and (2) involves in (sustainable) branding process in the organization; for the municipal participants, they are required to (1) has signed the contract with Omrin as their shareholder, and (2) has the knowledge about the determination on waste management company collaboration. The final participants are shown in **TABLE 1**.

Interviewee	Position	Organization
Interviewee1	Director strategy	Omrin
Interviewee2	Senior business advisor	Omrin
Interviewee3	Senior communication advisor	Omrin
Interviewee4	Head of communication & marketing	Omrin
Interviewee5	Policy advisor for household waste and circular economy	Municipality of Leeuwarden
Interviewee6	Advisor of sustainability	Municipality of Groningen
Interviewee7	Manager of customer relation, policy communication, and advice	Irado

TABLE1
Participants for the interview

Data Collection

Each participant is interviewed with the interview guideline (see **APPENDIX A and B**) built before the interview with main themes and probing questions (Leech, 2002). Nonetheless, because it was a semi-structured interview, it allowed us greater freedom in generating unique ideas for this exploratory work (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Interviews are conducted in April and May 2022 by Google Meet or Microsoft Team in English. They are recorded, coded and transcribed, and saved in the researcher's folder (see **APPENDIX C**) until the project is over.

Data Analysis

After the data collection, there are two sections of the data analysis accordingly. Firstly, the interviews with Omrin's employees and its shareholders are respectively collated in the separated

documents. Then, an analysis of the results of the two groups' interviews is conducted in order to find commonalities and uniqueness, especially the USP from both groups of interviewees' perspectives to discern how can Omrin integrate the idea of USP within sustainable branding procedures.

Quality of Research

The informed consent forms are delivered to each participant via email and orally reinforced prior to the interviews in order to address ethical concerns (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). After the whole research is completed, the recorded, transcribed, and coded files will be deleted by July 1st, 2022.

The interviewees in this research are considered involved in the sustainable branding or dominance of determining the collaborated company, therefore, the same questions will be asked within the divided groups (which means two interview guidelines for employees and municipalities) to ensure reliability. Triangulation will also be used to verify the consistency of collected data with existing English archives, and two groups of data from the interview simultaneously to develop a comprehensive understanding of the research question (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Finally, we follow the University of Groningen's code of conduct to ensure that our research does not break any ethical standards.

FINDINGS

The Idea of Using Sustainable Branding as a USP

The respondents from Omrin mentioned branding and operating the business sustainably has rooted in Dutch society, therefore, sustainability is a necessity for not only Omrin but also its competitors. While most companies are aiming for the same goal, branding sustainability seems difficult to be seen, “I think the main challenge is that we are doing quite a lot a matter of sustainable waste management, but it is hard for us to make it visible.....”, said Interviewee 3. Additionally, European Commission will introduce The Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) in 2023, all companies with over 20 million annual revenue obligate to report regularly on their environmental and social impact activities. Rather than just branding sustainability, understanding the reasons to brand sustainability as a USP, branding the real sustainability that others are not doing, and engaging more partners who can deal with the waste Omrin sorts out are the crucial issues for the employees.

Besides, the shareholders believe that trustful sustainability can help a business to brand itself big and good. The interviews indicate that the interviewees considered the issue of being sustainable to be the most crucial topic in modern society, interviewee 5 also believes that branding sustainability as a USP would be a difficult task due to the fact of other companies would probably have the similar idea of being more sustainable. Interviewee 7 further described "*.....by branding then you mean to expose that you're good at it because then other parties will um are more eager to do business with you.....*".

Omrin's Sustainable Strategic Branding Management (SSBM)

Situational analysis- external. Regarding what approaches have been implemented to use sustainable branding as a USP. Omrin's employees mentioned they sent the customer surveys to its shareholders for customer satisfaction this year. They can, in this way, have more clear ideas about what customers are satisfied with and not, thus improving their performance. Every 2 to 3 years, they analyze the customers to check how they think about Omrin's results, and every 4 years with the strategy recreation, the wishes and expectations of shareholders are taken into account. However, these analyses only focus on the municipalities and businesses (primary customers), not on the public or the inhabitants of the municipalities (secondary customers).

Board meetings are held quarterly for Omrin and shareholders to communicate and present the result every season, however, Omrin does not identify the information consistency between Omrin's brand and its customers.

Regarding the analysis of its competitors, some employees analyze them in the daily workload in an informal way, for instance, the information from the news, online websites, the contacts with other companies, or in the waste management union. On the strategic level, every four years together with rebuilding the company strategies, the larger scale of opponent's analyses was taken, including the annual reports.

Concerning the external environments, Omrin pays a lot of attention to the legal environment (EU policy, Dutch national law, and municipal permits), and ecological environmental factors constantly (new technologies regarding sorting, recycling, and incinerating wastes). Relatively, the social environment has received less attention, only temporary incidental research has been analyzed on a few projects.

Situational analysis			
External analysis		Internal analysis	
Customer	V	Actual positioning	-
Brand touchpoints	X	Product (service) stewardship	V
Competitors	V	Product (service) side-effects	X
Legal environment	V	Human resources	V
Social environment	-	Identification of threats	V
Ecological environment	V	Opportunity concerning sustainability	V

V: Executed; X: Not executed; - : Not executed by the interviewees; Mentioned to be improved

TABLE 2

Omrin's situational analysis execution

Situational analysis- internal. Several interviewees have mentioned that the effect on sustainability is not measurable, Omrin focus only on the environmental targets they have set rather than the positioning information to the target market.

For the reason that most of Omrin's products are services, the analysis of product stewardship and side-effects of product is executed by the customer survey and interviews with employees from the served customers.

In respect of human resources, Omrin is eager to recruit sustainable-minded people. For current employees, they receive an employee survey every 4 years, and Omrin communicates with them frequently to increase their level of knowledge on sustainability as much as possible complemented by the sustainable development goals (SDGs) to inspire them. By doing this, they can understand what Omrin is currently doing and what they can do to make a difference. As aforementioned, Omrin adjusts the strategy every 4 years. Many analyses are executed during that, including the identification of threats and opportunities concerning sustainability by using SWOT analysis on Omrin externally and internally. Every year, the employees also do a smaller analysis to see whether Omrin is on the right track.

Sustainable brand identity and corporate goal. The shareholders can obtain Omrin's brand identity through Omrin's website, annual report, board meeting, and other social media. Every interviewee had slightly different responses on the corporate goal, but the ideas are all focused on environmental sustainability: circular economy, close the loop, optimization of post-separation,

less burning and more green energy, and several SDGs.

Sustainable brand architecture and other company brands. Compare to other waste management companies, the scale of Omrin is not big, only approximately 500 employees. The employees do not consider Omrin a large company to divide into many company brands, the shareholders have similar perspectives on this topic. Therefore, the sustainable brand architecture of Omrin would be dominated by the corporate brand and none of the company brands were identified. For the employees, the collection, post-separation, incineration, fermentation facilities, and recycling shops – Estafette, are all in the name of Omrin. However, for the municipalities, Estafette and Bedrijfsafval (industrial wastes management) seem to be other brands out of the corporate brand – Omrin. Interviewee 5 affirmed this statement by explaining the fact that there are individual website pages for these two services other than inside Omrin’s main website page.

Interviewee 5, “I think there are people who work at Estafette, these recycling shops that have a like a distance to the enter the market or who are yeah by any means have a difficulty in finding a job they can work at the recycling shop.has a different uh website and like a really different image than like the regular Omrin page so I think they do try to brand uh as the Estafette in a very sustainable way and also as like form of a social company.”

Brand evaluation toward sustainability. Due to being a state-owned public company, Omrin’s brand consolidation or expansion can not be fully decided by the company itself. The geographic expansion of the brand needs the involvement of more municipalities as the shareholders. Most participants mentioned, that this situation can be both advantage and also disadvantage to Omrin. However, regarding the expansion, this could be a disadvantage because Omrin can not decide the geographic service area only if the municipality is one of the shareholders. This limits Omrin’s business in mainly Province Friesland and merely in Province Groningen. Leaving this aside, other smaller projects’ expansion and consolidation can be determined by Omrin’s employees which are assessed by the feasibility study on finance and sustainability, both factors are taken into consideration. However, these are only limited to business projects but not brands’ consolidation and expansion.

Brand organization and internal brand management. Internal management of employees shows that Omrin are dedicated to recruiting sustainable-minded employees, and educate current employees and providing satisfactory salary. Interviewee 4 said, “ well in the human resource department,the way they do it is more and more focused on the sustainability,we try to get people, new people for jobs for positions who have that sustainable attitude....., we do focus

and we talk a lot about our sustainable dreams and our sustainable responsibility, for new people you see that that attitude is a necessity but for the current employees we try to communicate as much as possible about sustainability and development that they feel okay with it too.....”. This reveals the effort that Omrin put on its current and future employees on sustainable value implantation.

Branding Sustainable as a USP

What have we done? Since 2012, Omrin’s vision is supporting the circular economy and focusing on closing the loop (Gielen, 2021). Furthermore, it has been the frontrunner since 2013. In order to promote the uniqueness of sustainability, Omrin has several approaches: generating more green gas from the organic wastes, preserving biodiversity, increasing sustainable projects and approaches, building sustainable communities, and communicating more sustainable stories and examples to the public. Omrin has promoted itself through the local press, annual report, celebrities, local events, and their service — green trucks, to increase the awareness of sustainability and show the public that Omrin is different from others.

What else can we do? To the employees, the priority is to be proud of Omrin’s results, its sustainable performance, and what they are doing for the environment. Thus, tell its customers, the public, and the ministries Omrin’s sustainable stories and examples, and simultaneously discover more opportunities for the application of the resources from the wastes to solve more environmental problems. Other than that, maintaining the facilities’ performance and doing things well are the basic requirements.

Traits of Omrin and Its Competitors

Advantages of Omrin. For the employees, biodiversity has become Omrin’s sustainable focus since Feb 2019, contrary to its competitors, Omrin pays a lot of attention to the biodiversity in its business regions. Not only by signing the BijenPact⁵, but also work with experts in the field of biodiversity, and participate in local partnerships. Started with four areas, now the activity expand to more service locations. Despite this, all interviewees agree on the high energy efficiency of Omrin’s incinerator, mechanical post-separation, and fermentation facilities — the whole waste processing chain are Omrin’s sustainable advantages. Several interviewees also brought up the superiority of low prices of the service and owing by municipalities, therefore, it is not a profit-driven, but a planet-driven company. As a result, the customers’ objectives are aligned with

⁵ See <https://www.silenceofthebees.eu/bijenpacts/>

Omrin's corporate target, which is sustainability.

Interviewee 4, "... other advantage of Omrin is that we use techniques in sorting the waste which are innovative and the combination of those techniques make it also possible that we have a quite high percentage of recycling....."

Disadvantages of Omrin. Although being a state-owned company is an advantage for Omrin, meanwhile it can be a downside. The corporate decisions and strategies are made together with the director of the boards, this causes the difficulties in Omrin's expansion and development. Another disadvantage is the capacity of the incinerator, the nearly full capacity of Omrin's incinerator in Heerenveen hinders it to collaborate with more municipalities and process more wastes from other waste collection companies.

Strengths of Omrin's competitors. The scale of other waste companies is simpler, they either have collection sectors or incinerators, this leads to the focus on a single business. In addition, companies with private investors have larger economic scales and can expand and decide the direction of the companies as they want.

Furthermore, the geographic focuses are larger for them to brand themselves to the public, be seen by the public, and show the world what they are doing.

Weaknesses of Omrin's competitors. The sustainable performance of its opponents is not better than Omrin from both Omrin's employees' and shareholders' aspects. The less devotion to the biodiversity, less energy efficiency of incinerators, and merely meeting the regulatory standards on CO₂ pollution.

Apart from that, larger companies are not flexible, for instance, Omrin has shorter lines regarding relationships and communication with its customers to work out things quickly.

USP of Omrin. For all the interviewees, the USPs of Omrin are the same as its advantages. To be more specific, the combination of the comparable price, high energy efficiency, and sorting techniques is the uniqueness that separates Omrin from its competitors. The price of Omrin might not be the lowest among the waste management companies, however, the price is still comparable while the customers are looking for a sustainable waste management company to deal with their waste. The energy efficiency of Omrin's incinerator performs the best in the Netherlands, and its fermentation is the biggest in western Europe. Additionally, the post-separation technique sorts out more categories of waste than other waste companies, it consequently prompts more wastes to be recycled. Finally, great enterprise of being sustainable and continuous devotion to sustainability

are Omrin's USPs as well. Since the world changes quickly, catching up with the newest technology and resilience of fitting the world are also the key reasons why its customers choose Omrin as their partner.

Interviewee 7, "The combination of the performance of the sorting and the high energy efficiency of the incineration that's brilliant combination."

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The Reasons for Using Sustainable Branding as a USP

Prior to branding sustainability as a USP, Omrin should first ponder on what are the reasons for doing it. Because the incinerator has a fixed amount of capacity when Omrin cannot expand its geographic business scope, either the waste from current customers decreases or the advancement in sorting technique could be the possible solutions. According to the data, interviewees believe that there are several reasons for Omrin to use sustainable branding as a USP- doing good, preserving the environment, and being competitive in the market. Using sustainable branding as a USP can keep the sustainable identity of the corporate brand hence revealing its continuity of sustainability ambition to the customers and thus enhancing its ascendancy in the target market (Kotler & Lee, 2005; Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2013; Sammui-Bonnici, 2014). Sustainable branding brings a deeper meaning to the brand image that strengthens the emotional bonding and distinctness (Kurowska, 2003), thus improving public recognition of the brand (Kotler & Lee, 2005). Excluding the reasons for its own and environmental benefit, Omrin should also deliberate what is the reason for using sustainable branding as a USP on the public. Aside from using sustainable branding as a USP to its primary customers, Omrin can brand it to the secondary customers, inhabitants of serving municipalities (Sammui-Bonnici, 2014). According to Bremmers, Omta, Kemp, and Haverkamp (2007), non-governmental environmental organizations and local inhabitants have a positive influence on the government's environmental developments. The inhabitants of serving municipalities can be considered the indirect customers, their satisfaction and understanding of their municipalities' cooperated company can influence the decision of the municipalities secondarily. Clarify firstly the reasons for branding sustainability as a USP resonates with the purpose can guide the employees to execute practices toward the target groups (Annweiler, 2018), thereby Omrin can formulate clear policies on branding and stick on the right track towards using sustainable branding as a USP.

A New Idea of USP: Unique Sustainable Point

Since sustainability has become the focus of most waste management companies, merely using sustainable branding as a USP is impractical. For that reason, Omrin must brand the unique sustainable point, that is, the sustainable branding distinguishes Omrin's uniqueness from its competitors'. The findings indicate Omrin's unique sustainable branding is environmental-oriented, for instance, the highest energy efficiency incinerator in the Netherlands, a high percentage of waste separation, the biggest fermentation in west Europe, and green trucks, but less attention to social and financial aspects. As Foroudi and Palazzo (2021) said, "A sustainable brand should integrate environmental, social, and economic issues into its business operations.", which refers to Lein (2019), many that believe themselves to be sustainable businesses merely satisfy the environmental criteria. Take the recycling shops, Estafette, as example—marginalized laborers are trained with vocational skills to find their jobs. Interviewee 7 suggested that Omrin can recruit these marginalized people in the collection and processing divisions. These people can be recruited to Omrin, but not other companies since they are already trained in the skill to fix recycled furniture. He believes, in this way, Omrin can target more sustainable approaches by connecting to more people in need. On the other hand, the financial aspect of sustainability was not been discussed much in the interviews, only "low price" and "comparable price" were mentioned as Omrin's unique selling point. According to Bowman (2011), financial sustainability is the capacity of an organization to maintain the general operation while seizing the opportunities and reacting to the threats. Excluding one interviewee who raised an issue about Omrin's facility, none interviewees note the financial operation as an issue for Omrin. He mentioned although there are only a few times of facility shutdowns, they can still cause some financial concerns. Hence, keeping the facility stable can brand Omrin's unique sustainability in both environmental and financial aspects. It can ensure the high efficiency of facilities, but also the revenue from generating the energy. In sum, since most companies in the waste management industry are aiming to brand sustainability as their USP, what Omrin can do is better performance in those projects—the "real" integration of sustainability that focuses on finance, environment, and society simultaneously.

SSBM with USP

The research question of this thesis is "How to use sustainable branding as a USP in a waste management company?" and what are the prerequisites for executing it? This section is an overview of SSBM with the consideration of USP as an element within branding management.

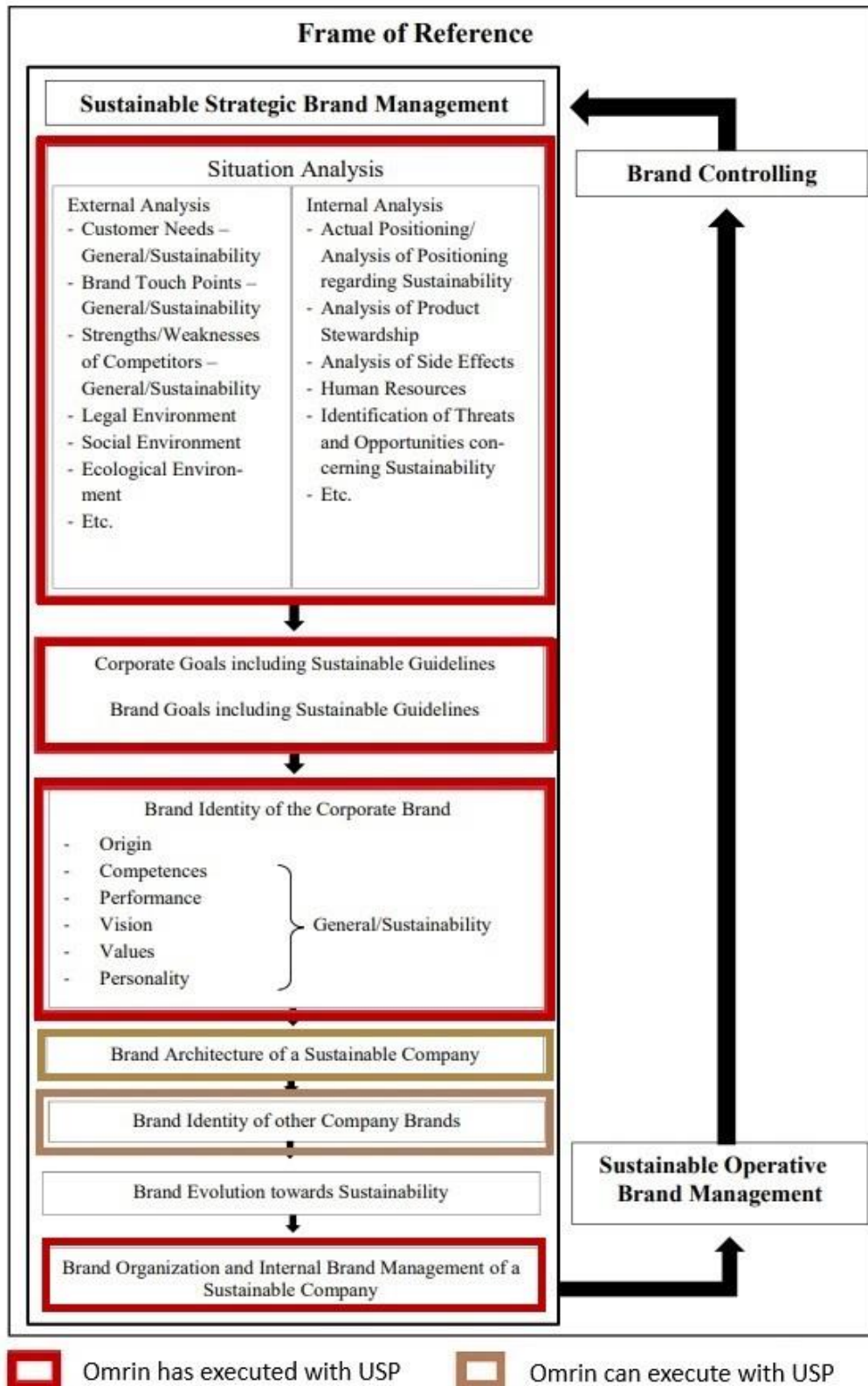


FIGURE 5

Integration of SSBM and USP in Omrin's corporate branding

FIGURE 5 presents in which procedures Omrin has executed the sustainable branding as a USP, the procedures with red frames are the ones that Omrin has integrated with the uniqueness, and the brown one is not. Only one process in the SSBM framework has not been mentioned can be integrated by using sustainable branding as a USP, brand evaluation towards sustainability. It is probably due to the brand's consolidation and expansion have no relationship with uniqueness since none of the interviewees has mentioned the uniqueness in this phase.

The information from situational analysis aids branding sustainability and assists the company figures out what can be its own uniqueness. Specifically, companies analyze customers, competitors, human resources, legal, social, and ecological environments to clarify the internal and external circumstances thus recognizing the tendency of the target market. As a major aspect of a supplier's proposition, branding is the domain through which corporations gain the maximum level of connection with customers (McKinsey, 2013), which becomes the most influential element in sustainable marketing strategies (Grubor & Milovanov, 2016). These analyses not only come with the understanding of “what is crucial to the customers and public” and “how will culture and social institutions possibly evolve”, and most significantly “how to lead, but not follow others' steps” (Grubor & Milovanov, 2016), these analyses help the company discover its own uniqueness.

While talking about Omrin's corporate goal, although all answers from the employees point in different directions, the responses relate to environmental sustainability. However, USP integration into the corporate goal is leading the company in a more different or further direction than others. From the author's point of view, together with brand identity, these involve the information about its competitors, an ambition, and distinct characteristic that make it stand out from the crowd.

Regarding the identity of other company brands. Under the case of Estafette as Omrin's company brand, Omrin can brand Estafette in a form of a social company that decreases the obstacles to the public, since waste management processors, especially incinerators are considered to be NIMBY infrastructures. On the other hand, Estafette complements the scarcity of communication with the secondary customers of Omrin's main business, accordingly creating the chance of branding Omrin in a different medium. In a larger picture, Omrin can ponder on how to brand Estafette in a unique way with sustainable traits. Specifically, Estefette's and Omrin's names have sustainable-related meaning—relay, recycle, and circular, and these brand slogans can be used as the USP effectively (Petty, Leong, & Lwin, 2010).

The media Omrin uses in the procedure of branding sustainability as USP are local press, annual sustainable reports, events, websites, interviews, and presentations in the quarterly shareholder meetings. Other social media were also mentioned a few times, for example, Twitter, and Youtube. When social media is used as a tool of two-way communication, the performance of sustainable branding and the results of the business will both be better (Lee and Park, 2016). Through which media and what messages do you send are identically important. Interviews show that they think Omrin should be prouder of its results, performance, and sustainable practices, however, the messages Omrin sent do not present as expected. Kumar & Christodouloupoulou (2013) suggested that managers can build their brand by explaining what actions they have taken for the planet and humans. In the case of Omrin, it should try more effort to disclose the information on both the investments and results (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2013). The image of striving for sustainable development is an important component of brand equity, interviewee 6 also mentioned that the continuity of sustainable development is one of the key USP of Omrin because he believes Omrin will do better in the future.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research is to find out how can Omrin use sustainable branding as its USP, the interviews with Omrin's employees and primary customers reveals what has been implemented by Omrin and how the customers perceive Omrin's sustainable practices. By examining Omrin's sustainable strategic branding management and taking USP into account in the SSBM framework, the result shows that in the case study of Omrin, USP can be applied in most of the stages in SSBM. However, this research fills the gap of scarce literature on sustainable branding in the waste management company and branding sustainability as a USP. Moreover, the identification and implementation of the USP in sustainable corporate aid the practitioners the ability of flexibility and resilience, thus distinguishing itself from the ones who have similar approaches (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014).

Limitations

There are some limitations to this research. First, is the difficulty of generalizing the findings due to the scarcity of the study cases. The "NIMBY" (Not-in-my-back-yard) —a type of negative attitude toward waste management companies (Agamuthu et al., 2009; Johnson & Scicchitano, 2012) and the sensitivity of gathering data from non-collaborated municipalities cause difficulties in acquiring interviewees. Therefore, the interviewees only consist of municipalities that cooperate with Omrin, one cooperated partner, and its employees. Second, the insider-outsider effect has a

research bias within this research (Mullings, 1999). The position of an outsider for the interviewer limits access to holistic data through interviews. On the other hand, both interviewer and interviewees are not native English speakers, especially the interviewer is a beginner learner of Dutch, therefore, during the interview, some Dutch words might cause difficulty in transcription. Moreover, the websites, videos, and annual sustainable reports of waste management companies in the Netherlands are in Dutch, this causes another dilemma for the researcher doing triangulation. Third, the research design does not cover longitudinal research. The continuous implementation and further adjustment or adoption can be covered in future research. Fourth, this research only interviews Omrin's employees and primary customers, who are Omrin's shareholders simultaneously, therefore, there is scarce information from the secondary customer to reveal what are their expectations towards Omrin. Finally, this research was only investigated at one case company, therefore, it can be difficult to generalize on other cases. Nonetheless, the integration of SSBM and USP can be applied to other companies, and it provides new insight into the relationship between sustainability and USP. Future research can investigate how the public view the waste management company serving in their living areas to have a whole picture of branding sustainability as a USP. Hence, the integration of USP and SSBM in every step and the unique sustainable branding in the operational phase would be great and new opportunities for future research.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Interview guideline – Employees

Introduction to the research: Hello, my name is Yu-Jhen, Shih, from Taiwan. I'm a master's program student in sustainable entrepreneurship at the University of Groningen at campus Friesland.

The research purpose is to discover how can Omrin use sustainable branding as a Unique selling point (USP), and what procedures and prerequisites Omrin needs in order to brand sustainability as a USP. In this interview, the participants will be inquired questions related to sustainable branding as USP procedures and the traits of Omrin and its competitors.

You are invited to this interview because I would like to research how can Omrin use sustainable branding as a USP from the employees' perspectives and how the employee sees the prerequisites Omrin has in order to conduct branding sustainability as a USP.

Informed again- the ethics and recording information: As you signed the informed consent, that means that you voluntarily participate in this research study and interview. You can always withdraw your participation anytime if you have any considerations. Is everything clear for you? Then, I will start recording the interview now.

- **Introduction question**

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself and your job?
2. How is your job related to sustainability or branding? And what is that about?

- **Questions about Omrin**

3. What products/ services do Omrin offer to the customers? Are these products/ services belonging to different sub-brands? (Processor, collector, and recycled product store)

Questions about Sustainable branding and USP

4. What is the idea of using sustainable branding as a USP to you?
5. What has Omrin done / what are the procedures for using sustainable branding as a USP?

- **More questions regarding the detail of branding sustainability as USP compare to SSBM**

6. Has Omrin done the sustainable situational analysis (explanations are below)? If yes, what

has been done?

- There are two categories of situational analysis, external and internal. I will name them and if Omrin has done it, you can use 1-2 sentences to briefly explain what Omrin has done and what tool has been used.
 - i. External analysis:
 - the analysis of customers:
 - identification of brand touchpoints or points of interaction with the customer:
 - analysis of strengths and weaknesses of competitors on sustainability:
 - ◆ What are the (sustainable) advantages of Omrin?
 - ◆ What are the (sustainable) disadvantages of Omrin?
 - ◆ What are the (sustainable) strengths of Omrin's competitors?
 - ◆ What are the (sustainable) weaknesses of Omrin's competitors?
 - What do you think is the most significant uniqueness regarding the sustainability of Omrin? If there are more, please also name them.
 - legal environment:
 - social environment:
 - ecological environment factors:
 - ii. Internal analysis:
 - actual positioning regarding sustainability
 - product stewardship, side effects
 - human resources
 - identification of threats
 - opportunities concerning sustainability
- 7. How Omrin promote sustainable brand identity (brand's origin, competences, performance, vision, value, and personality) and corporate branding to its shareholders?
- 8. Does Omrin has sustainable corporate and brand goal? If yes, what is that?
- 9. There are 4 types of sustainable brand architecture: (1) dominate by the corporate brand, (2) company and product brands, (3) subsidiary or secondary brand, or (4) dominated by product brand and complemented by a small piece of information about the corporate brand? What do you think Omrin's sustainable brand architecture is?
- 10. Other than corporate brand identity, does Omrin also identify its company and product brands? If yes, what are they and how are they promoted?
- 11. How Omrin analyze its activities (sustainable projects or sustainable supply chain) to consolidate the brand (eliminate limited corporate resources to the activities that can arise a company's competitiveness) or geographic expansion or brand extension (line extension or category extension)?

- **Overall questions:**

12. Among all the detailed sustainable branding procedures, what do you think the distinctness compare to Omrin's competitors?
13. What else can Omrin do to use sustainable branding as a USP?
14. Is there anything didn't mention and you would like to discuss in the interview

Thank you for the participation, it's really nice that you took this interview, this really helps a lot. And yes, this is the end of the interview, if you have any questions, you can contact me via email and have the right to withdraw the interview anytime.

APPENDIX B: Interview guideline – Customers (Shareholders)

Introduction to the research: Hello, my name is Yu-Jhen, Shih, from Taiwan. I'm a master's program student in sustainable entrepreneurship at the University of Groningen in campus Friesland.

The research purpose is to discover how can Omrin use sustainable branding as a Unique selling point (USP), and what procedures and prerequisites Omrin needs in order to brand sustainability as a USP. In this interview, the participants will be inquired questions related to sustainable branding as USP procedures and the traits of Omrin and its competitors.

You are invited to this interview because I would like to research what are the prerequisites Omrin has in order to brand sustainability as a USP and what are the reasons municipalities choose Omrin but not its competitors as the corporate company to deal with the municipal waste from the municipalities' perspective.

Informed again- the ethics and recording information: As you signed the informed consent, that means that you voluntarily participate in this research study and interview. You can always withdraw your participation anytime if you have any considerations. Is everything clear for you? Then, I will start recording the interview now.

- **Introduction question**

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself and your job?

- **Questions related to Omrin**

2. What kind of Omrin's products/ services do you use as a customer? And, are these products/ services belong to different Omrin's brands? (Processor, collector, and the recycled product

shop)

- **Questions regarding Sustainable branding and USP**

3. What is the idea of using sustainable branding as a USP to you?
4. How important is sustainable branding for you when choosing a corporate company? And why?
5. How important is the unique selling point of a company for you when choosing sourced out company? And why?

- **Questions regarding municipalities' view on Omrin's sustainable branding procedure**

6. Do you know Omrin's sustainable brand identity (brand's origin, competences, performance, vision, value, and personality) and corporate branding? If yes, what are they? And how do you get this information?
7. What is Omrin's sustainable corporate and brand goal? How does that work?
8. There are 4 types of sustainable brand architecture: (1) dominate by the corporate brand, (2) company and product brands, (3) subsidiary or secondary brand, or (4) dominated by product brand and complemented by a small piece of information about the corporate brand? What do you think Omrin's sustainable brand architecture is?
9. Other than corporate brand identity, does Omrin also identify its company and product brands? If yes, what are they and how are they promoted?

- **Overall questions:**

10. What are the main reasons the municipalities choose Omrin other than its competitors? And regarding sustainability? (Are the reasons the same?)
11. The following questions are about ... (what alternatives do they have)
 - ◆ What are the (sustainable) advantages of Omrin?
 - ◆ What are the (sustainable) disadvantages of Omrin?
 - ◆ What are the (sustainable) strengths of Omrin's competitors?
 - ◆ What are the (sustainable) weaknesses of Omrin's competitors?
 - ◆ What do you think is the most significant uniqueness regarding the sustainability of Omrin? If there are more, please also name them.
 - ◆ How is the municipality's objective translated into Omrin's targets?
12. Is there anything didn't mention and you would like to discuss in the interview?

Thank you for the participation, it's really nice that you took this interview, this really helps a lot. And yes, this is the end of the interview, if you have any questions, you can contact me via email and have the right to withdraw the interview anytime.

APPENDIX C

This links to the google drive folder which includes informed consent forms and interview transcriptions for this thesis, please ask for the access to this folder:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1fEogrrA1vnp74TJEOWBPWOKOggVzTZNo?usp=sharing>