



Neuromarketing and Sustainability as a Competitive Advantage in the International Market: The Case of Zouri

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Abstract

The growing importance of sustainability has significantly influenced consumer behaviour and transformed the way companies compete in international markets. At the same time, neuromarketing has emerged as an innovative approach to understanding the emotional and cognitive processes that shape purchasing decisions. This study aims to analyse how sustainability and neuromarketing contribute to the creation of competitive advantage in international markets, using the case study of Zouri Shoes, a Portuguese sustainable footwear brand that transforms marine plastic waste into environmentally responsible products. A qualitative methodology based on literature review and case study analysis was adopted. The research examines the relationship between sustainable marketing, consumer behaviour, emotional engagement, and competitive differentiation, with particular attention to the role of neuromarketing in interpreting consumer responses to sustainability-oriented communication strategies. The findings indicate that sustainability is a central component of Zouri's value proposition and a key driver of brand differentiation. The brand's communication strategy incorporates emotional storytelling related to environmental protection and ocean preservation, aligning with neuromarketing principles. These elements enhance consumer engagement, strengthen brand loyalty, and support international competitiveness. The study concludes that integrating sustainability and neuromarketing creates a powerful mechanism for value creation and differentiation in competitive international markets.

Keywords: Neuromarketing; Sustainability; Sustainable marketing; Consumer behaviour; Competitive advantage; International marketing; Zouri Shoes.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, sustainability has taken on an increasingly important role in the business world and in consumer behaviour, becoming a central element in both corporate strategy and market competitiveness. Growing concern about environmental, social, and ethical issues has led consumers to increasingly value brands that demonstrate a genuine commitment to sustainable and responsible practices. As a result, sustainability has evolved from a mere differentiating factor into a strategic imperative influencing both domestic and international markets (Kotler et al., 2021).

In parallel, contemporary consumer behaviour has become increasingly complex, driven by digital transformation, information overload, and emotionally saturated media environments. These changes have accelerated the development of new marketing approaches aimed at understanding the deeper cognitive and emotional mechanisms behind purchasing decisions. In this context, neuromarketing emerges as an interdisciplinary field that combines neuroscience, psychology, and marketing to analyse how emotional and cognitive stimuli influence consumer choices (Lim, 2018). Research indicates that a significant proportion of purchasing decisions occurs at a subconscious level and is strongly influenced by emotional factors that go beyond rational evaluation (Plassmann et al., 2012).

At the same time, recent years have witnessed the rise of new marketing trends focused on authenticity, emotional engagement, and purpose-driven communication. Among these, sustainable emotional storytelling has emerged as a key approach, combining sustainability values with emotionally engaging narratives that allow brands to communicate their purpose in a more meaningful way. This trend has gained particular relevance in the post-pandemic context, where consumers increasingly demand transparency, authenticity, and positive social and environmental impact from brands (Fog et al., 2010; Kotler et al., 2021).

In the sustainable fashion sector, these developments are especially significant. Consumers are increasingly attentive to the origin of products, materials used, production processes, and environmental impact, which requires brands to adopt communication strategies that address not only functional needs but also emotional motivations and personal values (Testa et al., 2021).

Within this context, Zouri Shoes is used as a relevant case study. The Portuguese brand stands out for producing sustainable footwear using recycled marine plastic waste and for integrating circular economy principles into its business model. Although a small and emerging company, Zouri represents a meaningful example of how sustainability and emotionally driven communication can be combined to create differentiation and international relevance in niche markets. Furthermore, Zouri is particularly relevant for this study because sustainability and emotional storytelling

are central elements of its brand identity, making it a suitable example for exploring the growing trend of sustainable emotional storytelling.

Thus, the main objective of this study is to analyse how neuromarketing, sustainability, and sustainable emotional storytelling can contribute to the creation of competitive advantage in the internationalisation of sustainable brands. To achieve this, a case study of Zouri Shoes is conducted, exploring how neuromarketing principles can strengthen brand positioning, enhance consumer engagement, and improve international competitiveness. To address this objective, the study is guided by the following research question:

How do sustainability and neuromarketing contribute to the creation of competitive advantage in international markets?

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach based on a literature review and case study analysis, allowing the connection between theoretical frameworks and their practical application in the context of international marketing.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sustainability and Consumer Behavior

Sustainable marketing has come to play a central role in contemporary business strategies, especially in a context where consumers are showing growing concern for environmental and social issues. Peattie and Belz (2010) argue that sustainable marketing goes beyond simply satisfying needs, seeking to create economic value while preserving environmental and social well-being. This approach implies a structural shift in how companies design their value proposition.

The literature shows that consumers are increasingly inclined to value brands that demonstrate genuine environmental commitment. Font and McCabe (2017) emphasize that sustainability can serve as a competitive differentiator, especially in markets where consumers have high levels of environmental awareness. However, Ottman (2011) warns that the impact of sustainability on consumer behavior depends heavily on its integration into the brand's core, rather than merely as a superficial communication strategy.

One of the main challenges identified in the literature relates to the so-called "attitude-behavior gap." Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) demonstrate that, although many consumers express environmental concerns, factors such as price, convenience, and consumption habits can prevent these attitudes from translating into actual behavior. This phenomenon underscores the need to understand not only what consumers say, but also how they actually make decisions.

More recently, Lim (2023) emphasizes that consumer behavior in the era of sustainability is increasingly complex, being influenced by emotional, social, and identity-related factors, and not merely by economic rationality.

2.2. Neuromarketing

Neuromarketing is an interdisciplinary field that integrates knowledge from neuroscience, psychology, and marketing with the aim of understanding the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that influence consumer behavior (Lim, 2018).

Unlike traditional market research approaches, which rely primarily on questionnaires and interviews, neuromarketing seeks to analyze mental processes that occur subconsciously during decision-making. Several studies indicate that a significant portion of purchasing decisions is influenced by emotions, memories, and automatic associations that are not always recognized by consumers themselves (Plassmann et al., 2012).

Among the most widely used models in this field is the Three Minds model, which proposes that consumer decisions result from the interaction between three complementary systems: the reptilian brain, associated with instincts and survival; the limbic mind, responsible for emotional processing; and the neocortex, related to the rational and logical analysis of available information (Renvoisé & Morin, 2007).

The reptilian brain reacts quickly to simple, striking visual stimuli, playing a key role in capturing attention. The limbic system is associated with emotions, memories, and feelings, significantly influencing consumer preferences. In turn, the neocortex is responsible for the rational analysis of factors such as quality, price, technical characteristics, and the functional benefits of products.

Thus, neuromarketing helps us understand that purchasing decisions do not result exclusively from rational analysis, but from a combination of emotional and cognitive processes. This perspective is particularly relevant for sustainable brands, since environmental values often generate emotional responses capable of positively influencing brand perception and purchase intent.

2.3. Sustainable Emotional Storytelling: A New Marketing Trend

In recent years, organizations have sought to develop more effective ways to communicate their values and build lasting connections with consumers. In this context, storytelling has come to play a central role in marketing strategies, enabling brands to convey complex messages through engaging and emotionally relevant narratives (Fog et al., 2010).

Storytelling involves using stories to communicate organizational ideas, values, and purposes. Rather than focusing solely on product features, brands seek to create narratives capable of generating emotional identification and strengthening consumer engagement (Lundqvist et al., 2013).

Recently, this approach has evolved into what several authors refer to as Sustainable Emotional Storytelling, a trend that combines emotional narratives with messages related to sustainability, social responsibility, and positive environmental impact.

This trend emerges in response to the growing demand for authentic brands aligned with the values of contemporary consumers.

The effectiveness of this approach is grounded in the principles of neuromarketing. Stories activate different areas of the brain simultaneously, enhancing attention, information retention, and the creation of stronger emotional connections. When linked to relevant environmental or social causes, these narratives can increase consumers' identification with the brand and strengthen feelings of belonging and purpose (Escalas, 2004).

Furthermore, Sustainable Emotional Storytelling offers an additional advantage for sustainable brands, as it allows abstract concepts—such as sustainability or the circular economy—to be transformed into concrete and emotionally meaningful stories. In this way, consumers move beyond perceiving only the functional attributes of products and come to understand the positive impact of their purchasing decisions.

2.4. Sustainability as a Competitive Advantage in International Markets

The growing importance of sustainability has significantly altered the competitive landscape for organizations. Today, companies compete not only on the basis of price or product quality, but also on their ability to generate social and environmental value (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

In international markets, sustainability is increasingly a factor of differentiation and competitiveness. Consumers in different countries show a growing willingness to support organizations that adopt responsible and transparent practices, valuing products produced in an ethical and environmentally sustainable manner (Testa et al., 2021).

Additionally, increasing environmental regulation and the implementation of policies related to the circular economy have encouraged companies to integrate sustainability into their business strategies. In this context, organizations that are able to effectively communicate their environmental commitments tend to develop competitive advantages that are more difficult for competitors to replicate.

The combination of sustainability and neuromarketing thus presents a particularly relevant strategic opportunity. While sustainability provides purpose and differentiation, neuromarketing allows us to understand how these values can be communicated more effectively, enhancing consumers' emotional engagement and strengthening the brand's competitive positioning.

As such, incorporating Sustainable Emotional Storytelling strategies can help increase brand awareness, consumer trust, and loyalty, making it a valuable tool for companies seeking to expand and consolidate their presence in international markets.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach that is exploratory and interpretive in nature, suitable for studying complex phenomena involving consumer behavior, emotional decision-making processes, and sustainable business strategies. The choice of this approach is justified by the fact that the study's objective is not to quantify relationships between variables, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of how sustainability and neuromarketing interact in building competitive advantage in international markets.

Qualitative research proves particularly appropriate in the context of contemporary marketing, as it allows for the analysis of subjective dimensions such as perceptions, symbolic meanings, emotions, and implicit cognitive processes. These elements are fundamental to understanding modern consumer behavior, especially in contexts of sustainable consumption, where emotional and identity-related factors play a decisive role.

3.1. Research strategy: case study

For this research, a single-case study strategy was selected, focusing on the Portuguese brand Zouri Shoes. This methodological approach was chosen due to the need to conduct an in-depth analysis of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-world market context, where business strategy, brand communication, and consumer behaviour are closely interconnected.

According to Yin (2018), the case study method is particularly suitable for investigating contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, enabling a holistic and contextualised understanding of complex situations. Zouri Shoes represents a relevant case because it explicitly integrates environmental sustainability into its business model, using recycled plastic waste collected from the oceans as a primary raw material in footwear production.

Furthermore, Zouri Shoes was selected because it represents a contemporary example of an emerging sustainable brand whose business model is strongly centred on environmental impact and purpose-driven communication. Unlike larger multinational brands, Zouri offers a clearer context in which sustainability and emotional storytelling are core elements of brand identity rather than complementary marketing initiatives. This makes the company particularly suitable for exploring the growing trend of Sustainable Emotional Storytelling from a neuromarketing perspective.

3.2. Data collection

Data collection was based on secondary sources of a qualitative nature. This process included an analysis of relevant scientific literature in the fields of sustainable marketing, neuromarketing, consumer behavior, and competitive advantage, complemented by publicly available information related to Zouri Shoes.

The brand's digital communication content was also analyzed, including product descriptions, institutional messages, and storytelling elements associated with its environmental identity. The use of multiple sources allowed for theoretical triangulation, increasing the interpretive robustness of the study and reducing potential biases associated with reliance on a single source of information.

Additionally, relevant empirical and theoretical studies were considered to contextualize sustainable consumer behavior and the neurocognitive mechanisms associated with decision-making, thereby ensuring consistent alignment between theory and empirical analysis.

3.3. Data analysis technique

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis, a technique widely used in social science and marketing research. This approach allows for the identification of recurring patterns, thematic categories, and implicit meanings present in both the literature and the brand's communications.

The analysis process was carried out in three interconnected phases. In the first phase, the collected material was initially coded, identifying units of meaning related to sustainability, emotional communication, and competitive positioning. In the second phase, these codes were grouped into broader analytical categories, allowing for a coherent structuring of the data interpretation. Finally, in a third phase, a theoretical interpretation of the results was conducted, establishing links between the identified patterns and the existing literature.

Three main categories of analysis were defined: sustainability and environmental practices, neuromarketing and emotional communication, and competitive advantage in international markets. These categories allowed the analysis to be structured in a manner consistent with the research objectives.

3.4. Methodological rigor

To ensure the scientific rigor of the research, the criteria of credibility, transferability, reliability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were taken into account.

Credibility was ensured through the use of multiple theoretical and empirical sources, as well as through the consistency between the analysis and the conceptual framework. Transferability was enhanced through a detailed description of the case study context, allowing for an understanding of the phenomenon in other similar contexts. Reliability was ensured by clearly explaining the methodological procedures adopted, while confirmability was ensured through the use of recognized scientific literature as an interpretive basis.

3.5. Limitations of the study

Despite the methodological rigor employed, this study has some limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, the research is based exclusively on secondary data and does not incorporate direct insights from consumers or stakeholders through methods such as interviews or surveys.

Second, the analysis focuses on a single case study, which limits the ability to generalize the results to other brands or industries. However, this type of limitation is characteristic of qualitative studies, whose primary objective is analytical depth rather than statistical generalization.

Additionally, no direct neuroscientific methods, such as EEG or eye-tracking, were used, which limits the capacity for empirical observation of consumers' emotional responses, restricting the analysis to inferences based on the literature and brand communication.

4. Results

The analysis of the Zouri Shoes case study identifies a set of consistent patterns that demonstrate how the brand integrates sustainability and neuromarketing into the construction of its value proposition and its international competitive positioning. The results obtained are not limited to describing the company's practices but seek to interpret how these practices influence consumer perception and reinforce the brand's differentiation in the market.

4.1 Sustainability as the Core Structure of the Business Model

The results demonstrate that sustainability at Zouri Shoes does not function as a peripheral element of communication, but rather as the structural foundation of its business model. The use of ocean-recovered plastic as the primary raw material highlights the application of a circular economy approach, in which environmental waste is transformed into productive resources with commercial value.

This deep integration of sustainability into the production process contributes to the construction of a coherent and authentic brand identity, a factor particularly relevant in a context of growing consumer distrust regarding greenwashing practices. The literature suggests that perceived authenticity is one of the main determinants of consumer trust in sustainable brands, which is confirmed in the case analyzed.

Additionally, the brand's local and ethical production reinforces its environmental and social credibility, allowing it to position itself as a responsible alternative within the footwear sector. This positioning is particularly relevant in international markets where traceability and transparency in the value chain are increasingly valued.

4.2 Sustainability and the Creation of Perceived Value

The results indicate that the perceived value of the Zouri brand is not based solely on the product's functional attributes, but rather stems from a combination of functional,

ethical, and symbolic dimensions. The functional dimension is associated with the quality and design of the footwear; the ethical dimension relates to the positive environmental impact of production; and the symbolic dimension is linked to the environmental identity that the consumer acquires by consuming the brand.

This three-part value structure is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary marketing, since consumers evaluate not only the product itself but also the meaning associated with its consumption. In the case of Zouri, purchasing the product is interpreted as an act aligned with environmental and social values, which increases the propensity to buy and reinforces brand loyalty.

4.3 Neuromarketing and Consumer Emotional Engagement

One of the key findings of this study is the clear identification of mechanisms associated with neuromarketing in brand communication. Zouri Shoes consistently employs emotional storytelling strategies focused on protecting the oceans and reducing marine pollution, which helps trigger positive emotional responses in consumers.

Based on neuromarketing literature, these narratives may contribute to stronger emotional engagement and influence how consumers process information. According to Kahneman (2011), such emotional stimuli are often associated with System 1 decision-making, characterized by rapid, automatic, and intuitive responses. Therefore, consumers' reactions to Zouri's environmental narratives may not depend exclusively on rational evaluation but also on affective associations generated through brand communication.

The visual elements used by Zouri, such as images of nature, oceans, and coastal environments, reinforce this emotional impact, contributing to the creation of positive mental associations. These associations play a fundamental role in shaping brand memory, increasing the likelihood of recognition and future preference.

4.4 Brand Experience and Emotional Connection

The analysis suggests that Zouri Shoes creates a brand experience that extends beyond the functional benefits of footwear. Through its sustainability-focused communication, consumers may perceive their purchase as a contribution to a broader environmental cause. This symbolic dimension allows consumption to become a form of self-expression aligned with personal values.

Such identification can strengthen feelings of responsibility, pride, and belonging, contributing to a deeper emotional connection with the brand. As a result, Zouri positions itself not only as a footwear company but also as a brand that enables consumers to express their environmental identity.

4.5 Competitive Potential and Internationalization

The results also show that the integration of sustainability and emotional communication directly contributes to the brand's potential for internationalization. In international markets, particularly in Europe, there is a growing appreciation for sustainable, ethical, and transparent products.

In this context, Zouri presents a value proposition aligned with global trends in responsible consumption, which allows it to differentiate itself in a highly competitive market. The combination of sustainable innovation and emotional storytelling constitutes a distinctive factor that strengthens its international competitiveness.

Additionally, the brand benefits from the fact that sustainability is increasingly becoming a regulatory requirement rather than just a competitive advantage, which enhances the strategic relevance of its positioning.

4.6 Summary of Results

In summary, the results demonstrate that Zouri Shoes' competitive advantage stems from the interplay between three fundamental dimensions: structural sustainability, emotional communication, and the creation of symbolic value.

Sustainability provides the material and ethical foundation of the value proposition; neuromarketing explains the emotional mechanisms that influence consumer perception; and their combination generates a differentiated and competitive brand experience in an international context.

These results reinforce the idea that the success of sustainable brands depends not only on their environmental practices, but also on how those practices are communicated and emotionally experienced by consumers.

5. Discussion

Analysis of the results allows us to conclude that the relationship between sustainability and neuromarketing in the context of international brands cannot be understood through a linear cause-and-effect logic, but rather as an integrated system of value creation where rational, emotional, and symbolic dimensions interact continuously.

First, the results reinforce Porter's (1985) perspective, according to which competitive advantage stems from a company's ability to create unique value that is difficult to imitate. However, the analysis of the Zouri case suggests that, in the current context, the creation of competitive advantage depends not only on operational efficiency or product innovation, but also on the ability to build emotional meaning around the offering. In this sense, Porter's approach is complemented, not replaced, by the emotional marketing logic advocated by Lindstrom (2008), which highlights the role of unconscious associations in shaping consumer preference.

Additionally, Porter and Kramer's (2011) perspective on shared value is particularly relevant, but reveals limitations when applied in isolation. Although it explains the creation of economic value through social impact, this approach does not delve into the psychological mechanisms through which that value is perceived by the consumer. It is precisely here that neuromarketing makes a fundamental additional contribution, by demonstrating that the perception of value is not merely rational, but strongly mediated by automatic emotional processes (Kahneman, 2011; Damasio, 1994).

In this regard, the results suggest that System 1 thinking plays a predominant role in how consumers respond to sustainable brands. However, contrary to simplified interpretations of Kahneman's theory, System 2 is not eliminated but rather activated later to justify decisions that are already emotionally influenced. This interaction between cognitive systems is particularly evident in the case of Zouri, where the environmental narrative triggers an initial emotional response, followed by rationalization based on ecological arguments.

Another relevant contribution relates to the literature on sustainable behavior. Although Ajzen (1991) and Han et al. (2015) argue that environmental attitudes directly influence behavioral intentions, the results of this study suggest that this relationship is significantly reinforced by the emotional intensity of brand communication. In other words, environmental attitudes alone are not sufficient to explain consumer behavior; it is necessary to consider the mediating role of emotion, a factor that has been less explored in traditional models of planned behavior.

Furthermore, the results partially challenge the traditional view that green consumers are consistently rational in their decisions. On the contrary, it is observed that sustainable purchasing decisions are often driven by identity-based and emotional mechanisms, where consumption serves as a form of expression of the consumer's moral "self." This finding aligns with contemporary approaches that argue that sustainable consumption is also symbolic and identity-based consumption (Lim, 2023).

From a strategic perspective, the case of Zouri suggests that sustainability alone may not be sufficient to generate competitive advantage. Rather, competitive differentiation appears to emerge from the interaction between sustainable practices and the ability to communicate those practices in a meaningful and emotionally engaging way. This finding reinforces the argument that value creation in contemporary international markets depends not only on what companies do, but also on how consumers perceive and interpret those actions.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this study proposes an integrated approach to sustainability and neuromarketing, suggesting that competitive advantage in international markets cannot be explained solely by structural factors (such as resources or positioning), nor by isolated psychological factors alone, but rather by

the interaction between the two. This perspective expands traditional models of sustainable marketing by introducing the neuroemotional dimension as a central variable in value creation.

Finally, despite its innovative positioning, Zouri Shoes operates within the constraints of a small-scale business structure, which may limit its global visibility and competitive capacity when compared to established multinational footwear brands such as Adidas. Its internationalisation process can face challenges related to brand recognition, distribution capacity, and competition from global players with significantly higher marketing resources. These factors suggest that, although Zouri presents a strong example of sustainable and emotionally driven branding, its competitive advantage may be more pronounced in niche markets than in large-scale global competition.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to analyse how neuromarketing and sustainability can serve as sources of competitive advantage in the international market, based on the case of Zouri Shoes. The findings suggest that the competitiveness of contemporary sustainable brands does not depend solely on product quality or operational efficiency, but also on their ability to create emotional meaning and establish strong connections with consumers.

The analysis highlights that sustainability, when structurally integrated into a business model, can function as a strategic differentiator. In the case of Zouri Shoes, the use of marine plastic waste as a raw material not only contributes to addressing an environmental challenge but also reinforces brand authenticity and environmental credibility.

The study further suggests that neuromarketing provides a useful framework for understanding how consumers may respond to sustainability-oriented communication. Emotional storytelling, visual imagery, and purpose-driven narratives can contribute to stronger emotional engagement and reinforce positive brand associations, supporting differentiation in increasingly competitive international markets.

Importantly, the findings reflect the growing relevance of Sustainable Emotional Storytelling as an emerging trend in contemporary marketing. As consumers increasingly seek authenticity, transparency, and social impact, brands are moving beyond traditional product-centred communication and adopting emotionally engaging narratives linked to sustainability and purpose. The case of Zouri illustrates how this trend can be incorporated into brand strategy and international positioning.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated approach that combines sustainability and neuromarketing as complementary drivers of competitive advantage. From a practical perspective, it

suggests that companies seeking international growth should not only implement sustainable practices but also communicate them through meaningful and emotionally engaging narratives.

A key limitation of this study is its reliance on a single case study and secondary data sources, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Future research could incorporate primary data collection methods, such as interviews, consumer surveys, or neuromarketing techniques, to examine consumers' emotional responses more directly.

In conclusion, the competitive advantage of sustainable brands such as Zouri appears to emerge from the interaction between sustainability, emotional communication, and symbolic value creation. This combination reflects a broader transformation in international marketing, where ethics, emotion, and purpose increasingly shape consumer-brand relationships.

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