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The Role of Sustainability in Family Firm Branding: An Identity-Based Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines how large German private family firms integrate sustainability into their corporate brand identities and how familiness shapes these meanings. Using an interpretivist design, it analyzes sustainability-related discourse from the websites of 25 family-controlled firms through the Family Firm Sustainability Brand Identity Matrix (FFSBIM), adapted from the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM). The analysis reveals that sustainability is articulated via three overarching logics: Moral Stewardship, Translational Familiness, and Systemic Professionalization. Familiness acts as a flexible legitimacy resource. It is explicit in value-driven brand identity elements, implicit in relational ones, and institutionalized in systemic contexts. Cross-case comparison identifies five ideal types of sustainability–familiness integration, illustrating how firms combine heritage, responsibility, and professionalization to meet stakeholder expectations. The research advances branding, sustainability, and family business literature by showing that familiness and sustainability co-evolve as interdependent brand identity resources. It emphasizes aligning moral narratives with credible practices and provides a framework for assessing the coherence between identity and sustainability.

Keywords: family business; familiness; sustainability; corporate brand identity; legitimacy

1 Introduction

Corporate brands have become strategic identity platforms through which organizations articulate their purpose, values, and societal legitimacy. As Balmer (2008) argues, questions of corporate identity frequently arise during periods of strategic transition, such as market shifts, institutional pressures, or reputational scrutiny, when organizations must clarify “who we are” and “what we stand for.” Corporate brand identity, therefore, functions not merely as a communication device but as an expression of organizational self-understanding, shaped through a continual dialogue between internal culture and external expectations (Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Urde & Greyser, 2016).

Within corporate branding scholarship, the corporate brand has evolved into the symbolic and communicative core of the organization (Urde, 2009). Effective brand management ensures coherence across brand identity elements, both internally and externally (Urde, 2013). As Blombäck and Ramírez-Pasillas (2012) note, corporate identity provides traits that can be credibly communicated, while brand identity transforms these traits into visible commitments. Thus, corporate brands serve as vehicles for organizational sense-making, in which identity becomes both the source and the outcome of communication.

Family firms offer a particularly salient context for examining such brand identity work. Their organizational identity is deeply intertwined with family identity, embedding personal values, intergenerational continuity, and socioemotional wealth (SEW) into strategic behavior and communication (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Habbershon & Williams, 1999). Many family firms portray themselves as custodians of responsibility, trust, and long-term stewardship, attributes that function as distinctive brand resources (Craig et al., 2008; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005; Zellweger et al., 2010). However, the presence of the family name or family legacy in the brand introduces both moral authority and reputational risk (Micelotta & Raynard, 2011), making family firm brands complex, layered, and highly sensitive to identity tensions

In parallel, sustainability has become a defining dimension of corporate legitimacy. Public concern about climate change, social inequality, and ethical responsibility has elevated sustainability from a peripheral corporate practice to a core element of organizational purpose and market differentiation (Deegan, 2002). Within branding, sustainability provides moral, symbolic, and strategic content that reshapes

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how organizations communicate their identity and societal role. As Urde (2009) suggests, values such as environmental or social responsibility can evolve from internal conviction into external brand commitments, enabling organizations to preserve identity continuity while adapting to new institutional expectations.

Sustainability aligns closely with long-term orientation and stewardship logics in family firms. Stewardship theory suggests that family ownership fosters intergenerational thinking and responsibility for future generations, making sustainability a natural extension of family identity (Berrone et al., 2010; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005). However, research has tended to treat family identity and sustainability as distinct domains: corporate branding studies examine sustainability primarily as a communicative and strategic concept, whereas family business literature focuses on socioemotional wealth, governance, and behavioral motivations. As a result, scholarly understanding of how family firms integrate sustainability into their corporate brand identities and how familiness shapes these claims remains limited.

This study addresses this gap by examining how large German private family firms integrate sustainability within their corporate brand identities. Germany represents a particularly relevant context, as it is home to one of the world's largest concentrations of family-controlled enterprises (EY & University of St. Gallen, 2025; Oinaala & Teo, 2025). These firms combine long-term strategic orientation with highly developed communication infrastructures, making them exemplary cases for studying the interplay between sustainability, familiness, and brand identity.

Conceptually, the study adapts Urde's (2013) Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM) into the Family Firm Sustainability Brand Identity Matrix (FFSBIM). This analytical framework organizes brand identity into nine key elements. It is used here as a sensitizing lens to interpret sustainability-related discourse while attending to the visibility and function of familiness. In line with an interpretivist orientation, the goal is not to measure the prevalence of themes but to understand how sustainability and familiness are constructed as meaning systems across internal, bridging, and external brand identity elements.

Empirically, the study applies directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012) to sustainability and identity statements published on corporate websites. Websites serve as curated platforms where organizations intentionally construct and project their desired brand identities (Hooghiemstra, 2000). By coding sustainability discourse across the nine FFSBIM elements for 25 of Germany's largest private family firms, the study identifies patterned ways in which sustainability is anchored in identity narratives, relational cues, and managerial systems. A cross-case comparison synthesizes these element-level patterns into firm-level configurations and further abstracts them into ideal types of sustainability–familiness integration.

The study makes three contributions. First, it advances corporate branding theory by showing how sustainability and familiness operate as interdependent brand identity resources rather than separate constructs. Second, it offers an empirically grounded typology of sustainability–familiness integration, revealing heterogeneous pathways through which family firms reconcile moral heritage with institutionalized sustainability practices. Third, it demonstrates how structured brand identity frameworks, such as the CBIM, can be adapted for interpretive discourse analysis, thereby bridging systematic identity models with qualitative approaches to meaning-making.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Chapter 2 reviews research on corporate brand identity, sustainability in branding, family firm identity, and sustainability in family firms, developing an integrative framework for the study. Chapter 3 presents the methodological design, including the Family Firm Sustainability Brand Identity Matrix (FFSBIM) and the cross-case analytical process. Chapter 4 presents the findings, detailing the element-level sustainability logics, cross-case configurations, and ideal types. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to existing theory, outlining both theoretical and managerial implications. Chapter 6 concludes the research, and Chapter 7 identifies limitations and outlines avenues for future research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Corporate Brand Management

In an increasingly competitive environment, a strong corporate brand is a key market differentiator and a strategic resource (King, 1991; Urde, 2009). The ability to create, develop, and protect brands as strategic assets represents an organizational competence and mindset (Urde, 2009). The strategic objective of corporate brand management is to secure loyalty across an organization's diverse publics, a condition increasingly viewed as essential for business survival and long-term success (Balmer, 1995). At the same time, organizations can no longer rely solely on their product brands for protection, as stakeholders increasingly scrutinize corporate behavior (Balmer, 1995) and expect transparency regarding ethical and environmental responsibility (Deegan, 2002; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Effective corporate brand management, therefore, depends on clarity of mission and vision, a strong organizational culture, and well-developed competencies that align internal identity with external perceptions (Urde & Greyser, 2016).

A persistent managerial challenge has been the absence of a widely agreed framework to define and align corporate brand identity as a coherent whole. The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM) (see Figure 1) was introduced to address this gap, guiding managers in describing, defining, and aligning corporate brand identity elements in an integrated manner (Urde, 2013).

2.1.1 Corporate Identity Foundations

Corporate brand management is closely connected to the broader concept of corporate identity, with considerable overlap between the two (Blombäck & Ramírez-Pasillas, 2012). The boundary between internal self-definition ("what we are") and external projection ("how we wish to be perceived") is often indistinct. Corporate identity provides the foundation for brand management by capturing the organization's defining traits, which must remain consistent with external promises (He & Balmer, 2007).

Originally, corporate identity referred mainly to how an organization presented itself through visual symbols and design (Margulies, 1977, as cited in Balmer, 2008). It was later conceptualized as a trichotomy of strategy, culture, and communication (Balmer, 1995). Subsequent developments viewed identity as a strategic resource encompassing ethos, activities, market position, and culture, shaped by past strategic choices (Balmer, 2002). Balmer and Greyser (2002) extended this thinking, distinguishing five types of identity—actual, communicated, conceived, ideal, and desired—each reflecting different internal and external perspectives. Among these, communicated identity is especially relevant to brand management, as it manifests through controllable communication (advertising, sponsorships, public relations) and uncontrollable communication (media commentary, word-of-mouth). This highlights that identity is co-created through interactions with stakeholders.

Corporate identity research also differentiates between corporate and organizational identity. The former emphasizes the organization's traits and external communication, while the latter focuses on employees' internal perceptions (Balmer, 2008). This dual role underscores how identity aligns internal culture and external reputation, particularly salient in family firms where personal and family identity often intersect with the corporate brand. Individual identity represents a fundamental dimension of corporate identity, providing the foundation from which an organization's sense of self and meaning emerge (Balmer, 2008). This linkage is evident in family firms, as the company's identity frequently mirrors the owners' personal and family identities, embedding family values within the corporate brand (Blombäck & Ramírez-Pasillas, 2012).

Corporate identity provides direction, guides behavior, and supports communication, belonging, and strategic integration (Balmer, 2008). Effective management, therefore, requires identifying the organization's defining features, which are understood as central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics that constitute organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985, as cited in Balmer, 2008). Over time, the boundary between corporate identity and brand identity has become increasingly blurred, with the former now recognized as a strategic resource that strengthens both internal motivation and external reputation (Melewar & Jenkins, 2002).

2.1.2 Corporate Brand Identity and Core Values

Corporate brand identity is a distilled expression of corporate identity, as Balmer (2008) terms it, the covenanted identity, formed by emphasizing selected organizational attributes that shape the brand image (Blombäck & Ramírez-Pasillas, 2012). It articulates promises to stakeholders derived from organizational attributes and values (Balmer & Greyser, 2002). This identity reflects management's intended positioning and includes aspirational associations, values, and visual or verbal symbols such as logos and design elements (Aaker, 2004; Melewar & Jenkins, 2002; Urde, 2009).

While corporate identity captures the organization's complex traits, brand identity focuses on chosen features that foster a desired image and reputation (Balmer, 2010). Corporate brand identity thus emerges from the interplay between organizational identity, leadership vision, and marketing strategy (Blombäck & Ramírez-Pasillas, 2012). Through practical corporate identity work, organizations strive to align internal and external perceptions with their overarching identity, thereby ensuring coherence between identity and image. Emotional attachment similarly provides a vital competitive advantage, reinforcing that corporate brands generate meaningful associations (Karaosmanoglu & Melewar, 2006).

At the core of this process lies the corporate brand's core values, which serve as its moral compass and define what it stands for (Urde, 2009). Depending on their authenticity and resonance, core values may be true, aspirational, potential, or hollow (Urde, 2009). These values, rooted in organizational culture and history, must align with stakeholder expectations. When genuine, they ensure continuity and credibility, guiding internal and external brand development (Urde, 2009).

Aligning brand promises with actual behavior over time establishes a track record, an unwritten contract between the organization and its stakeholders (Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Urde, 2009). This continuity forms part of the firm's heritage, demonstrating consistent commitment to values (Urde et al., 2007). Carefully chosen values appeal simultaneously to reason and emotion, fostering trust and lasting relationships. For example, Volvo's long-standing core values of quality, safety, and environment guided brand building; notably, environment evolved from a latent internal value to a visible external theme, illustrating how core values can express both continuity and desired future identity (Urde, 2009).

To manage this alignment, the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM) (see Figure 1) offers a comprehensive framework for defining and coordinating brand identity. It comprises nine interrelated brand identity elements: internal (Mission and Vision, Culture, Competences), external (Value Proposition, Relationships, Position), and bridging (Brand Core (Core Values), Personality, Expression), which are both internal and external (Urde, 2013). A central feature of the CBIM is its emphasis on aligning all elements with the brand core, the synthesis of core values, and a clear brand promise, ensuring authenticity and strategic coherence. The matrix integrates brand- and market-oriented perspectives, enabling managers to balance their internal identity with external expectations. Internal values primarily guide organizations with a strong brand orientation, whereas market-oriented ones tend to respond more to stakeholder demands, focusing on the external brand identity elements. Successful brand management depends on balancing these orientations so that the brand identity remains authentic and externally resonant (Urde, 2013; Urde & Greyser, 2016). The structure of these nine interrelated elements, along with the central role of the brand core in aligning them, is illustrated in Figure 1.

2.2 Sustainability in Corporate Brand Management

Sustainability has emerged as a defining dimension of contemporary corporate brand management. As global attention shifts toward environmental degradation, resource depletion, and social inequity, firms are increasingly evaluated for what they produce and how responsibly they operate (Deegan, 2002). Within the evolving logic of corporate branding, sustainability bridges the gap between organizational values and stakeholder expectations, enabling firms to legitimize their actions, enhance their reputational capital, and express their long-term purpose. Building on the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM), sustainability can be understood as a dimension that permeates all elements of corporate brand identity, shaping mission and vision, guiding cultural norms and behavior, informing stakeholder relationships, and defining corporate expression. Research in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), stakeholder theory, and legitimacy theory explains how sustainability becomes embedded in corporate brand identity and communication, transforming brands into carriers of societal value and moral meaning (Bravo et al., 2012; Hooghiemstra, 2000; Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Note on terminology. Throughout this study, the terms "Corporate Social Responsibility" (CSR) and "Sustainability" are used interchangeably, reflecting their overlapping treatment in the cited literature. Scholars such as Hooghiemstra (2000) and Maignan and Ralston (2002) describe CSR and sustainability as convergent frameworks through which firms express their ethical, social, and environmental responsibilities toward stakeholders and society. Following this convergence in both research and practice, the present study adopts the term "Sustainability" as an umbrella term encompassing CSR-related activities, discourses, and legitimacy strategies, unless a cited author explicitly distinguishes between the two.

2.2.1 Sustainability as a Dimension of Corporate Brand Identity

The integration of sustainability into brand identity is rooted in CSR and corporate reputation research, where socially responsible behavior is associated with legitimacy and competitive advantage (T. J. Brown & Dacin, 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Reputation, as a strategic asset, enables firms to command price premiums, attract investors, and achieve differentiation. Since reputation is shaped by the signals stakeholders receive regarding the organization's conduct and integrity, CSR activities serve as symbolic and substantive expressions of identity (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). In this view, sustainability reflects the internal ethos of the firm and communicates legitimacy to society.

CSR is thus one way to contribute to a coherent corporate identity, as it manifests the values and principles that guide corporate behavior (Balmer et al., 2007; Collier & Esteban, 2007). When sustainability is embedded in a firm's mission and vision, it becomes an integral part of its enduring identity, rather than a peripheral practice (Maignan & Ralston, 2002). Sustainability transcends philanthropy or compliance, expressing the organization's core purpose and moral stance (Collier & Esteban, 2007; Matten & Moon, 2008). Integrating sustainability into corporate identity also enhances stakeholder identification, where stakeholders perceive alignment between their values and those embodied by the organization (Dutton et al., 1994). Such identification strengthens trust, loyalty, and cohesion, improving employee commitment and customer attachment (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006).

From a corporate identity perspective, sustainability represents "what the company is" and "what it aspires to be." Identity extends beyond visual design to include strategic and cultural dimensions that define the firm's essence (Melewar, 2003). CSR, therefore, reflects an organization's behavior rooted in its culture and values. It becomes an enduring identity marker when genuinely embedded, signaling who the company is and what it stands for. This logic echoes Collier and Esteban's (2007) argument that CSR can directly define corporate identity when it embodies the organization's central and distinctive values. Similarly, van Riel and Balmer (1997) view socially responsible behavior as a manifestation of shared beliefs that link internal culture with external legitimacy.

Legitimacy theory further explains why firms adopt sustainability as a core element of their identity. Corporate survival depends on operating within societal norms and expectations (N. Brown & Deegan, 1998). CSR initiatives thus act as mechanisms for maintaining or restoring legitimacy when alignment between corporate behavior and social expectations is threatened (Hooghiemstra, 2000). Stakeholder-oriented CSR communication suggests that organizations respond to stakeholder expectations and engage differently with various groups depending on their visibility and influence (Guthrie et al., 2006; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). To secure continued support, firms prioritize the concerns of key constituencies, including employees, consumers, investors, and communities. In this context, sustainability serves moral and pragmatic purposes. It conveys ethical responsibility while providing a strategic response to stakeholder power and visibility.

Studies highlight that CSR and sustainability are increasingly considered strategic investments in brand reputation and equity (McWilliams et al., 2006). Fatma et al. (2015) demonstrate that CSR activities have a direct and indirect influence on corporate reputation and brand equity, thereby reinforcing the link between identity and external perception. The belief that "doing good" leads to "doing better" reflects a shift from compliance-driven to opportunity-driven sustain-

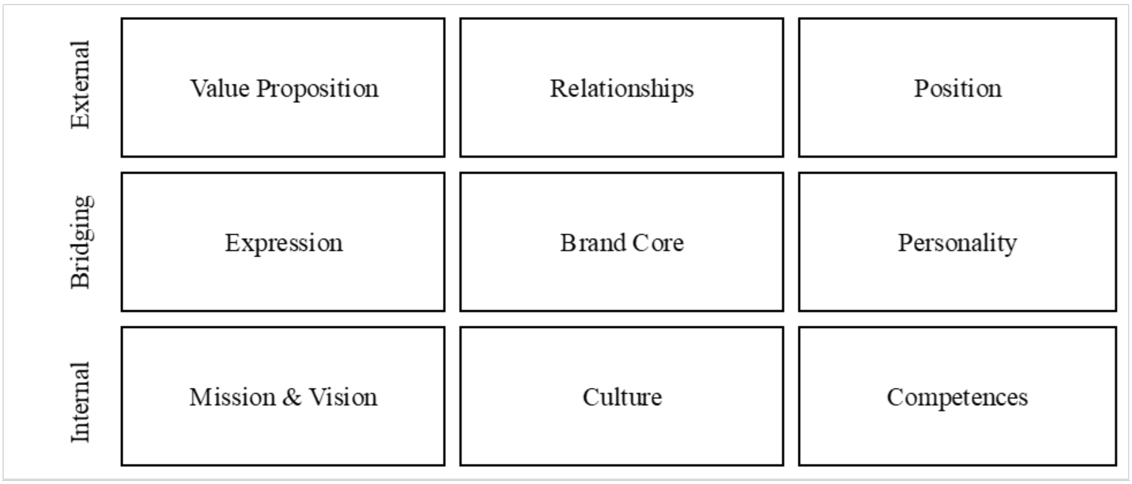

Figure 1: The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM)

Note. Adapted from Urde, M. (2013). The corporate brand identity matrix. *Journal of Brand Management, 20*(9), 742–761. https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.2013.12. Copyright 2013 by Palgrave Macmillan. Adapted under fair use.

ability (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Therefore, integrating sustainability into corporate identity anchors brand meaning in profitability and societal purpose, making sustainability a source of differentiation and legitimacy.

2.2.2 Sustainability Communication and Legitimacy

If identity defines who the organization is, communication determines how that identity is understood. Literature on corporate social reporting emphasizes that sustainability disclosure serves as a mechanism for influencing stakeholder perceptions and legitimizing corporate behavior (Deegan, 2002; Hooghiemstra, 2000; Neu et al., 1998). From a corporate communication perspective, such reporting extends beyond information provision to include identity projection and image management (Balmer & Greyser, 2002; Weder, 2017; Weder et al., 2019). Hooghiemstra (2000) argues that organizations utilize CSR communication as a tool for public relations to shape perceptions of legitimacy and protect their reputation. While the legitimacy framework focuses on compliance with social norms, the communication framework emphasizes impression management, creating symbolic alignment between the firm's identity and stakeholder expectations.

Communication about sustainability can be both constructive and risky. Excessive or insincere promotion may produce skepticism or "legitimacy backlash" (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). Morsing and Schultz (2006) propose three CSR communication strategies: stakeholder information, response, and involvement. The first relies on one-way dissemination of facts and achievements; the second adds feedback mechanisms while remaining firm-driven; and the third embodies interactive communication, inviting stakeholders to influence sustainability agendas and practices. The involvement strategy balances sensegiving and sensemaking, recognizing that sustainable legitimacy depends on participation rather than unilateral communication.

The credibility of sustainability communication depends heavily on authenticity and perceived integrity. Source credibility, honesty, and stakeholder engagement are key to effective CSR messaging. Partnerships with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), independent media coverage, or ethics awards can strengthen credibility by providing third-party validation (Hirschland, 2006, as cited in Wanderley et al., 2008). However, over-investing in sustainability advertising relative to actual performance can erode trust and provoke skepticism.

Cross-national studies indicate that sustainability communication practices differ more by country of origin than industry sector (Wanderley et al., 2008), reflecting the institutional embeddedness of social norms. What constitutes credible communication in one context may be perceived as self-promotion in another. Larger and more visible firms tend to disclose CSR information to maintain legitimacy and align with global standards (Bravo et al., 2012). The rise of digital channels further amplifies visibility, making sustainability narratives integral to a firm's ongoing identity construction (Weder, 2017; Weder et al., 2019).

Importantly, communication about sustainability does not merely mirror organizational behavior; it also discursively shapes it. When companies discuss sustainability, they co-create shared meanings that influence internal practices and societal norms (Weder, 2017). Sustainability communication thus evolves into communication for sustainability, a process that fosters organizational learning and sensemaking (Weder et al., 2019). Through this discourse, CSR transforms from a reactive legitimacy tool into a proactive driver of identity and change. In summary, sustainability in corporate brand management operates across identity and communication dimensions. Internally, it embeds ethical and environmental values into mission, culture, and behavior. Externally, it legitimizes and differentiates organizations through credible, interactive engagement with stakeholders. Together, these dynamics extend the CBIM framework by demonstrating how sustainability influences internal identity drivers and external market elements.

2.3 Family Firm Branding

The growing literature on family firm branding acknowledges that a brand is not merely a commercial construct, but also reflects the complex, intertwined social, emotional, and historical ties between the owning family and the business. Because family firms merge family and organizational identities to varying degrees, their brands often carry symbolic meanings related to legacy, trust, and long-term orientation, attributes that can differentiate them from non-family firms in competitive markets (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Habbershon & Williams, 1999; Zellweger et al., 2010). A firm's identity, values, and governance arrangements are shaped by family influence, while the brand becomes a visible expression of that family connection (Astrachan et al., 2018; Craig et al., 2008; Micelotta & Raynard, 2011).

Within this literature, two complementary perspectives dominate. The first explores how familiness, socioemotional wealth, and organizational identity form the internal foundation of a family firm's brand, clarifying how family influence shapes what the brand is. The second examines how these meanings are projected externally through communication, signaling, and stakeholder interaction—how family identity is made visible and interpreted in the marketplace. The following subsections discuss how internal identity resources emerge and shape brand meaning, as well as how these meanings are communicated and managed strategically across various audiences and contexts.

2.3.1 Familiness, Socioemotional Wealth, and Identity Formation

Family firm heterogeneity plays a central role in shaping identity work. More dispersed family ownership is associated with stronger financial objectives and formal control systems, indicating that diluted family control can shift the identity anchors of the business (Westhead & Howorth, 2007). At the heart of many decisions lies socioemotional wealth, the non-financial benefits tied to family identity, influence, and continuity. The potential loss of SEW is perceived as severe, often motivating families to take risks to preserve control and identity (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007).

As family firms evolve across generations, changes in ownership dispersion and managerial involvement can gradually dilute family influence and elevate financial considerations (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Hollander & Elman, 1988; Sirmon & Hitt, 2003). Earlier stages, by contrast, exhibit denser family social capital due to greater overlap between family and organizational domains (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Sirmon & Hitt, 2003). Beyond family ownership or management, familiness refers to the unique resource bundle created by the interaction between family and business, often used to explain differentiation and performance advantages (Habbershon & Williams, 1999).

Organizational identity—the characteristics members perceive as central, distinctive, and enduring—acts as a compass for decision-making, clarifying "who we are as an organization" (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). When family identification with the firm is strong, members experience the firm as an extension of themselves, deepening their pride and sense of belonging while infusing the brand with family meaning (Dyer Jr. & Whetten, 2006). These perspectives converge in the concept of family firm identity, which captures how family influence shapes the firm's values, behaviors, and brand meaning (Zellweger et al., 2010). The essence approach to defining a family firm emphasizes that only family-driven behaviors that produce distinctiveness justify labeling a firm as "family firm" in a strategic sense (Chrisman et al., 2005).

Identity also projects outward. Internally, it provides sensemaking and behavioral guidance; externally, it shapes how audiences interpret brand signals, influencing perceptions of products, strategic actions, and the people associated with the firm (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Many family firms deliberately emphasize their family identity to differentiate themselves from other businesses. The family label is often associated with trust, commitment, and a customer-focused approach, and has been linked to growth and profitability through customer-centered values (Craig et al., 2008; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005). The most robust advantages emerge when family involvement (through ownership and management), essence, and a consciously articulated family firm identity work together, creating synergy between family and business (Zellweger et al., 2010).

Family owners often shape the firm's identity directly through active management or by selecting and controlling managers, thereby pursuing reputation-related socioemotional goals (Berrone et al., 2010; Deephouse & Jaskiewicz, 2013; Zellweger et al., 2012). A long-term orientation encourages investments in social capital and reputation, while responsible conduct builds reputational capital that reinforces organizational identity over time (Miller et al., 2008; Zellweger et al., 2012).

2.3.2 Family Signaling, Brand Portrayal, and Communication

A useful distinction in family firm branding is between organizational identity (the internally shared self-definition) and corporate identity (externally orchestrated cues projecting intended perceptions) (Micelotta & Raynard, 2011; van Riel & Balmer, 1997). Corporate brand identity is a set of associations and promises designed to build trust and expectations. Managing this identity strategically is critical in competitive markets, where differentiation relies heavily on reputation and authenticity (Balmer, 2010).

Family firms can leverage their family-based identity to communicate values such as trust, responsibility, and continuity, supporting firm and product differentiation (Craig et al., 2008). However, they do not signal "family" uniformly. A comparative analysis of corporate websites reveals three distinct portrayals: family preservation (emphasizing heritage), family enrichment (blending heritage with modernity), and family subordination (downplaying the family to appeal to a broader stakeholder base). Strategy choice varies with product characteristics, firm size, and geographic dispersion (Micelotta & Raynard, 2011). Larger, international firms more often subordinate family signals to meet the diverse expectations of various stakeholders.

Empirical evidence suggests that higher family ownership and older firm age increase the likelihood of a family brand being communicated online. Strong family-business integration and control make family cues more salient on corporate websites (Botero et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2013). Cross-nationally, cultural context also influences signaling: Chinese family firms tend to downplay family identity online, whereas German family firms emphasize it more frequently (Chen et al., 2019).

Qualitative research identifies two main motives for communicating a family brand: identity-driven motives, rooted in family pride and identification, and expectation-driven motives, associated with reputational and market outcomes (Binz Astrachan & Botero, 2018). Protecting the family name and leveraging a family brand as a valuable, rare, inimitable resource, anchored in history and identity, are typical rationales (Zellweger et al., 2012). Positive audience responses can reinforce family pride and identification, creating a feedback loop between external perceptions and internal identity. Communication channels also play an important role. Corporate websites are a key, controllable medium, and evidence suggests that stronger family involvement and firm age predict more prominent online family signaling (Botero et al., 2013).

At the conceptual level, family business branding has been modeled through the Family Business Brand Identity, Portrayal, and Reputation Matrix (FBBIPRM) developed by Astrachan et al. (2018). This framework anchors the brand's core (identity) in family values, history, pride, and influence. It delineates nine interrelated brand identity elements—internal (Mission and Vision, Culture, Competences), external (Family Promise, Relationships, Positioning), and bridging (Identity, Personality, Expression)—mirroring the structure of the CBIM (Urde, 2013; Urde & Greyser, 2016). The matrix clarifies what is communicated, through which channels, and in what contexts, to achieve intended stakeholder associations and reputational outcomes.

In summary, identity foundations, such as SEW, familiness, and organizational identity, explain why family firms embed family meanings within their brands, while portrayal and communication strategies explain how these meanings are expressed across various contexts and channels. These insights provide a foundation for exploring sustainability issues in family firms, which are discussed in the next section.

2.4 Sustainability in Family Firms

Building on the preceding sections, which established how identity and reputation underpin corporate branding, sustainability in family firms can be understood as a normative–strategic domain where who the firm is (its family-influenced identity, values, and legacy) meets how it behaves toward stakeholders and the natural environment. A consistent theme in the family business literature is that family influence shapes motivation (why sustainability matters) and manifestation (how it is practiced and communicated). This section reviews these dynamics by examining the drivers of sustainability in family firms and the practices and communication patterns that arise from them.

2.4.1 Drivers of Sustainability in Family Firms

Across studies, family firms tend to avoid actions that could damage their reputation or the family name, even when they are not more visibly active than non-family firms in positive social initiatives. The underlying logic is reputational: concern for the family's image and desire to protect family assets leads decision-makers toward risk-averse and responsibility-consistent conduct (Dyer Jr. & Whetten, 2006). Related work conceptualizes reputation as moral capital that protects relational wealth and earnings streams in times of crisis (Godfrey, 2005). When responsibility becomes central to "who we are," deviating from that identity becomes difficult, reinforcing consistency in behavior (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

Family governance structures shape sustainability orientation by determining who makes decisions and on what basis. In most family firms, the dominant coalition, the small group of leaders who set the strategic direction, comprises family members or their appointees. This ensures that family values and long-term time horizons shape strategic priorities (Chua et al., 1999; Sharma & Sharma, 2011). Long leadership tenures, multigenerational ties, and strong identification between family and firm facilitate the diffusion of personal and family values into areas such as environmental management and social responsibility (McConaughy, 2000; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005).

From a behavioral perspective, family ownership and management confer discretion to pursue particularistic objectives, such as preserving socioemotional wealth, reputation, and control, which often compete with short-term profit maximization and elevate sustainability on the strategic agenda (Berrone et al., 2010; Carney, 2005; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). Sharma and Sharma (2011) further suggest that family influences attitudes toward stewardship, social norms that define responsible behavior, and perceived behavioral control, which enables the adoption of proactive environmental strategies. When family involvement is limited to ownership without managerial roles, these effects are weakened because non-family executives lack clear cues about the family's stewardship stance. Conversely, high ownership continuity and long-term orientation create stability and freedom to balance economic and socioemotional goals, making sustainability more feasible (Berrone et al., 2010; Carney, 2005).

Family vision, sometimes initiated by founders and redefined by later generations, can also steer firms toward cleaner technologies or responsible business models, particularly as markets mature. Overall, higher family involvement in ownership and management tends to foster favorable attitudes, norms, and capabilities for sustainability due to identity alignment, long tenure, SEW motives, and reputation concerns (Sharma & Sharma, 2011).

Empirical studies have linked family values and stewardship orientation to CSR outcomes. Families characterized by identification, altruism, collectivism, commitment, and obligation—values aligned with stewardship and SEW—tend to engage more proactively in CSR (Bingham et al., 2011; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). Family identification and commitment may also mediate the relationship between family involvement and CSR engagement (Bingham et al., 2011). Stronger family control (e.g., concentrated shareholding combined with managerial presence) amplifies these effects, whereas dispersed ownership or later generational stages can dilute them (Carney, 2005; Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). CSR engagement may evolve across generations as founders' legacies deepen, and emotional attachment becomes institutionalized (Bingham et al., 2011). Family influence can also constrain sustainability when conservatism or resource protection limits innovation (Campopiano & De Massis, 2015). This suggests that family identity can both enable and hinder sustainability, depending on the context and governance.

Legitimacy and moral standing are also persistent drivers of sustainability. Communication plays a central role in projecting identity and values, and concerns about reputation shape how stakeholders interpret these signals (Chreim, 2005; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Richards et al., 2017). Family aspirations to protect reputation, maintain control, preserve stakeholder relationships, and honor legacy reinforce visible responsibility (Berrone et al., 2010; Carney, 2005; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005). Founders often imprint these orientations, creating long-lasting legacies that sustain social and environmental engagement across generations (Hollander & Elman, 1988). In summary, identity-based, SEW-based, and legitimacy-based motives explain why family firms pursue sustainability, highlighting the interplay between moral commitment and strategic self-interest. The following subsection examines how these motives are translated into concrete practices and communication.

2.4.2 Sustainability Practices and Communication in Family Firms

Family firms often combine long-term orientation with investments that build reputational assets, such as family image, social capital, and stakeholder goodwill, rather than focusing solely on short-term financial outcomes (Miller et al., 2008; Zellweger et al., 2012). Empirical evidence suggests that family firms often match or exceed the environmental performance of their non-family peers. Larger, more visible family firms tend to broaden their CSR scope to include environmental, product, and diversity initiatives, while smaller firms emphasize employee welfare and community engagement (Berrone et al., 2010; Block & Wagner, 2014). Consistent with the preservation of socioemotional wealth, sustained responsible conduct fosters trust and long-term stakeholder support.

Family-controlled firms also tend to comply with environmental regulations and societal norms at higher rates, driven by concerns for legitimacy and the development of durable stakeholder relationships (Berrone et al., 2010). Their sustainability engagement often takes two forms: explicit CSR, encompassing voluntary programs and stakeholder dialogue, and implicit CSR, reflecting adherence to institutionalized societal expectations (Matten & Moon, 2008). Viewed through a stakeholder lens, CSR reporting becomes a dialogue mechanism for negotiating expectations and demonstrating accountability (Gray et al., 1995). Because communication practices constitute identity work, they serve as vehicles for managing moral legitimacy by signaling values and aligning projected image with stakeholder norms (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

The family–brand nexus strongly shapes sustainability communication choices. When family involvement, identification, and pride are high and when the family name is publicly associated with the firm, companies are more likely to communicate responsibly and position family stewardship as part of their identity narrative. Conversely, when family influence is distant or legitimacy risks are salient, firms may moderate family signaling while maintaining responsible practices through selective reporting (Deephouse & Jaskiewicz, 2013; Zellweger et al., 2010). In other words, the degree of family visibility and control determines how sustainability is enacted and communicated.

Taken together, these insights reveal clear connections with the CBIM framework. Family-anchored Mission and Vision, Culture, and Competences shape sustainability-infused Value Propositions, Relationships, and Position. The bridging components of Brand Core, Personality, and Expression carry sustainability signals across audiences. These linkages lay the groundwork for the integrative framework developed in the next section, which combines CBIM with sustainability and familiness to guide cross-case analysis.

2.5 Integrating Brand Identity, Sustainability, and Familiness: Conceptual Synthesis

The preceding literature reveals three perspectives that, when viewed together, illuminate how sustainability becomes intertwined with family firm branding. Corporate brand scholarship establishes that brand identity is a strategic and cultural construct, linking an organization's internal ethos with its external reputation (Balmer, 1995; Urde, 2009). The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM) (Urde, 2013) conceptualizes this alignment through nine interrelated brand identity elements that connect mission, culture, and competences to market expression and stakeholder relationships. Its purpose is to secure coherence between what an organization is and what it communicates (Urde & Greyser, 2016). However, while the CBIM offers structural clarity, it remains value-neutral regarding which moral or social commitments form the brand's essence. This limitation becomes evident as contemporary organizations are increasingly expected to demonstrate environmental and social accountability.

Sustainability research, by contrast, explains how responsibility functions as both identity and discourse. It provides moral content for brand identity while serving pragmatic roles in legitimacy and differentiation (Bravo et al., 2012; Hooghiemstra, 2000; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Sustainability reflects authenticity when embedded within mission and culture; when confined to communication, it becomes symbolic or defensive (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Deegan, 2002). The challenge lies in maintaining consistency between internal conviction and external expression, precisely the alignment problem the CBIM seeks to manage.

Family business studies add another dimension by showing that identity formation in family firms is not purely organizational but also personal and historical. Familiness (Habbershon & Williams, 1999) and socioemotional wealth (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007) anchor strategic behavior in values such as continuity, stewardship, and moral responsibility (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005). The family name is a moral signifier and a reputational asset (Deephouse & Jaskiewicz, 2013; Micelotta & Raynard, 2011). While this embeddedness can foster authenticity, it can also encourage selective or strategic communication to protect the family's legitimacy (Deephouse & Jaskiewicz, 2013; Micelotta & Raynard, 2011). Prior research has examined these tendencies separately—corporate branding's structural alignment, sustainability's legitimacy function, and familiness as a moral resource—but rarely within a single conceptual frame.

Integrating these streams suggests that sustainability in family firm branding must be understood in relation to its position within the brand identity system and its interpretation in light of family influence. The CBIM indicates where sustainability references appear, within internal brand identity elements, bridging elements, or external ones. Sustainability, primarily expressed through internal elements, implies an identity-embedded orientation (Urde, 2009); a focus on bridging elements reflects a search for legitimacy (Hooghiemstra, 2000); and an emphasis on external elements indicates a market-responsive orientation (Bravo et al., 2012). Familiness further shapes these orientations: as an enabler, it grounds sustainability in stewardship and long-term orientation; as an amplifier, it extends moral claims into reputation and trust (Habbershon & Williams, 1999; Micelotta & Raynard, 2011; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2005).

From this synthesis emerge several analytical lenses that help examine how family firms—here understood as large, privately held German family enterprises—construct sustainability within their brand identity. First, the depth of sustainability integration captures how sustainability permeates the CBIM elements from internal conviction to external communication (Urde, 2013; Urde & Greyser, 2016). Second, the mode of familiness differentiates between stewardship-based and reputation-protective orientations (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Micelotta & Raynard, 2011). Third, the communication orientation reflects how responsibility is articulated, whether as an expression of identity, stakeholder engagement, or image projection (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Weder et al., 2019). These perspectives enable a nuanced reading of how moral, strategic, and symbolic dimensions converge in family firm brand identity.

Building on these theoretical foundations, the study adopts the CBIM (Urde, 2013) and the Family Business Brand Identity, Portrayal, and Reputation Matrix (FBBIPRM) (Astrachan et al., 2018) as conceptual reference points. Their combined logic informs an interpretive lens termed the Family Firm Sustainability Brand Identity Matrix (FFSBIM), which retains the CBIM's nine elements but interprets them through a sustainability-related discourse, while also attending to the presence of familiness within that discourse. Rather than a measurement device, the FFSBIM provides an analytical structure for exploring how responsibility, values, and heritage interact in the brand identities of family-controlled firms. This synthesis thus concludes the theoretical review, providing the conceptual foundation for the study's qualitative exploration of how family firms integrate sustainability into their branding.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Interpretive Orientation

This study employs a qualitative, interpretivist research design to examine how sustainability is integrated into the brand identities of family-owned firms. From an interpretivist standpoint, organizational realities such as sustainability and familiness are socially constructed through discourse rather than objectively measurable attributes (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Accordingly, qualitative content analysis is treated as an interpretive process in which meaning is constructed and contextualized rather than merely counted (Schreier, 2012). The analysis, therefore, focuses on how firms construct the meaning of sustainability within their corporate narratives.

Interpretivism aligns with the study's focus on meaning-making and contextually embedded understanding. Sustainability and family identity are treated not as fixed properties but as discursive constructs that organizations mobilize to express values, purpose, and legitimacy. While discourse analysis could also have illuminated these constructions, directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was selected because it allows theoretical structure to guide interpretation while maintaining openness to emergent meaning. This balance combines the analytical transparency of content analysis with the interpretive sensitivity of discourse-oriented inquiry (Schreier, 2012). Thus, the study assumes that sustainability and familiness are not external realities to be measured, but interpretive resources through which firms construct organizational meaning.

3.2 Research Strategy

The study employs a multiple-case, cross-case comparative design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014). Each family firm represents a distinct case, and the corporate brand identity serves as the unit of analysis. Comparative case logic enables the identification of recurring brand identity patterns across diverse industries, seeking analytic generalization rather than statistical inference. The design aims to develop a conceptual understanding of sustainability within large, privately controlled firms across different industrial contexts. Using multiple industries allows pattern recognition while enhancing theoretical variety. Following Eisenhardt's (1989) principle of theoretical sampling, the number of cases (25) was determined by thematic saturation rather than numerical representativeness, ensuring sufficient variation for cross-case abstraction. While ambitious for interpretive inquiry, this breadth supports analytic transferability across Germany's major industry clusters.

3.3 Context and Case Selection

3.3.1 Country Context

Germany represents an ideal context for examining the intersection of sustainability and family firm branding. It hosts one of the world's largest concentrations of family-controlled enterprises. In the 2025 EY and University of St. Gallen Global 500 Family Business Index, Germany is the second-largest country in terms of headquarters, with 78 firms among the world's top 500 family-controlled companies (Oinaala & Teo, 2025). Their scale, family control, and industry diversity make Germany a particularly relevant setting for examining identity and legitimacy communication (EY & University of St. Gallen, 2025).

3.3.2 Sampling Frame and Criteria

The sampling frame comprised the 2025 EY and University of St. Gallen Global 500 Family Business Index, which lists the world's 500 largest family-controlled companies and defines eligibility based on revenue and family voting control (EY & University of St. Gallen, 2025). Firms from the index were included in this study if they met the following criteria:

1. Private ownership with equal or larger than 75% family voting control, ensuring visible family influence;

2. Publicly accessible web presence with identity and sustainability-related sections; and

3. Industry diversity, ensuring variation across key economic sectors.

These criteria ensured that selected cases reflected strong family governance and sufficient communicative visibility for analyzing sustainability discourse within brand identity. Five industries were selected based on the Index's representation and value-chain logic: Retail, Consumer Products, Mobility, Advanced Manufacturing, and Resource-Intensive Industries (a combination of Mining & Metals and Oil & Gas in the Index). This spread captures a progression from consumer-facing to resource-based firms. Within each sector, firms were ordered by descending revenues with the targeted family control. Firms meeting data criteria were selected sequentially until five per industry were included, yielding 25 cases (see Appendix A). Following Eisenhardt (1989), the sample size was designed to achieve theoretical saturation, balancing variety and conceptual depth rather than statistical representativeness. During data collection, three firms were excluded due to insufficient sustainability information, ensuring consistency in data depth and comparability across cases. This approach inevitably privileges firms with more developed online communication, reflecting identity management practices of legitimacy-seeking rather than representing the full spectrum of family firms.

Note on sampling. When an index entry represented a corporate group, the group's website was used as the primary data source, except in one case (maxingvest GmbH & Co. KGaA), where the group's website directed to the leading brand (Tchibo), over which it holds above 75% voting control. Firms' names are mentioned in the findings using the names by which they most frequently refer to themselves on their official websites, rather than their full legal names. All websites were analyzed in their English versions, which mirrored the German versions in terms of content and structure. For the sake of document-wide consistency, spellings from corporate discourse have been standardized to American English (e.g., "program," "neighbor"). Data was collected between August and October 2025 to ensure temporal consistency. The focus on publicly available web materials reflects the study's aim to analyze communicated identity—how firms intentionally present sustainability and family values to external audiences. While this approach may bias the sample toward communicatively active firms, it is methodologically consistent with the study's interest in public discourse and branding.

3.4 Data Collection

Data was gathered from official corporate websites, specifically from the homepage, the "About us / Company" section, History, and Sustainability/Responsibility sections, including transcribed short-embedded videos. Corporate websites provide controlled communication environments, making them ideal for studying intended identity expression (Hooghiemstra, 2000). The web context offers distinct advantages, providing continuously available, low-cost, publicly verified material (Wanderley et al., 2008). Previous studies have highlighted that firms increasingly favor websites as central tools for CSR communication (Bravo et al., 2012; Maignan & Ralston, 2002). In interpretive terms, corporate websites are viewed not as neutral reflections of organizational reality but as curated spaces where companies enact legitimacy and identity claims (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Accordingly, the analysis treats textual discourse as expressive performances of authenticity, consistent with interpretivist assumptions about the construction of meaning. Although visual materials such as imagery or design cues were contextually noted, the analysis focused exclusively on textual data, including transcribed video statements.

3.5 Analytical Framework: The FFSBIM

The Family Firm Sustainability Brand Identity Matrix (FFSBIM) was developed as the guiding analytical framework for this study. It integrates the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM) (Urde, 2013; Urde & Greyser, 2016) and the Family Business Brand Identity, Portrayal, and Reputation Matrix (FBBIPRM) (Astrachan et al., 2018) to capture the co-occurrence of sustainability and familiness within brand identity elements. The FFSBIM retains CBIM's nine elements—three internal (Mission and Vision, Culture, Competences), three external (Value Proposition, Relationships, Position), and three bridging (Core Values (Brand Core), Personality, Expression)—while interpreting each through a sustainability-oriented family firm lens. Following Urde's (2013) and Urde and Greyser's (2016) principle of guiding questions, each element was operationalized into a corresponding "what" question to orient the deductive coding of sustainability-related website contents (see Table 1).

During the coding process, only sustainability or responsibility-related texts were coded, while familiness was recorded when it appeared within those discourses. Familiness references were coded as co-occurring attributes within sustainability discourse, thereby enabling analysis of how family identity was invoked to legitimize or frame sustainability meanings. The comparative table showing the CBIM, FBBIPRM, and FFSBIM guiding questions appears in Appendix B. Although the FFSBIM provided structural clarity, interpretation remained flexible. Instances that did not fit predefined categories were noted in analytical memos and revisited during cross-case synthesis to prevent theoretical constraint (Schreier, 2012).

3.6 Analysis Procedure

Data analysis followed the logic of directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), complemented by the procedural guidance of Schreier (2012). Coding was conducted iteratively in MAXQDA. In the first phase, all textual segments were deductively coded into the nine FFSBIM elements (categories) using the guiding questions. This provided a structured map of sustainability-related expressions within each brand identity element. In the second phase, inductive subcodes (subcategories) were developed within these categories to capture emerging nuances of sustainability and family-related meaning. These subcodes were refined progressively as patterns stabilized across the initial batch of cases (a combination of firms with the highest revenue in each of the selected five industries). Through iterative coding, the early subcodes were refined and reapplied to the full dataset (five batches) to maintain consistency across all 25 cases (Eisenhardt, 1989) (see Appendix C). Case matrices (FFSBIMs) were developed in the third phase to identify recurring identity patterns, similarities, and contrasts among firms and across industries (see Appendix D). Finally, the typology was constructed on these matrices, following the interpretive logic of Kluge (2000) and Eisenhardt (1989). Analytical memos documented interpretive decisions, reflections, and theoretical linkages, ensuring transparency and reflexive awareness of meaning construction.

3.7 Ensuring Quality and Rigor

Trustworthiness was established using criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schreier, 2012). Credibility was reinforced through triangulation of multiple website sections and coding consistency across firms and industries. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a transparent audit trail of notes, memos, and analytical decisions. Confirmability was enhanced through explicit memoing of interpretive assumptions and theoretical reflections. Reflexivity involved ongoing memoing about how the researcher's assumptions might shape interpretation. These reflections were recorded in analytic memos to ensure that theoretical sensitivity did not become normative evaluation.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

All data used in this study were publicly available on corporate websites and did not involve human participants. Ethical considerations focused on accurate citation, fair interpretation, and respectful representation of corporate communications. All data were treated as organizational self-presentations rather than verified factual claims.

3.9 Methodological Limitations

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies exclusively on corporate websites, which reflect communicated rather than enacted identity and therefore capture curated discursive representations rather than internal practices or stakeholder perceptions (Balmer & Greyser, 2002). Second, the interpretivist approach treats sustainability and familiness as meaning-laden linguistic constructions (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000), implying that the analysis reflects a situated interpretation shaped by the researcher's theoretical lens. Third, the dataset relies on English-language versions of websites; although they are official, nuances may differ from the German versions. Fourth, the use of the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM) as a sensitizing framework may have guided thematic categorization, despite mitigation through inductive subcoding. Finally, the German institutional context introduces cultural specificity that may limit the transferability of the findings to family firms in other institutional environments. These methodological constraints clarify the interpretive boundaries within which the findings should be understood.

Table 1: FFSBIM Elements and Corresponding Guiding Questions

FFSBIM Element	FFSBIM Guiding Question
Mission & Vision	What sustainability aspect is reflected in our mission or vision that guides or inspires us?
Culture	Which of our attitudes, values, or practices support sustainability integration?
Competences	Which of our capabilities enable effective implementation and differentiation of sustainability?
Core Values (Brand Core)	What sustainability purposes, values, or commitments are embedded in our core values that we stand for?
Personality	What human characteristics or traits are associated with our sustainability approach?
Expression	What unique means are we using to convey our commitment to sustainability?
Value Proposition	What sustainability-related benefits are offered to our stakeholders?
Relationships	What aspects of our stakeholder relationships support our sustainability initiatives?
Position	What is our intended position regarding sustainability in the market and society?

4 Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings from the directed qualitative content analysis of 25 German private family firm cases, guided by the Family Firm Sustainability Brand Identity Matrix (FFSBIM). The analysis examines how sustainability and familiness are constructed within corporate brand discourse, focusing on how firms articulate responsibility, identity, and legitimacy through language, values, and discursive cues. Consistent with the interpretivist methodology outlined in Chapter 3, the findings are presented as interpretive syntheses rather than frequency counts or causal claims.

The chapter proceeds through three analytical stages that are conceptually built upon one another. Stage One identifies the dominant sustainability logics within each of the nine FFSBIM elements and traces how familiness becomes explicit, implicit, or discursively invisible within them. Stage Two integrates these element-level logics into firm-level configurations that reveal how different sustainability meanings cohere across brand identity elements. Stage Three abstracts these empirical configurations into a typology of ideal types that represent distinct modes of sustainability and familiness integration. These ideal types do not imply developmental stages. Instead, they illuminate alternative patterns through which firms combine heritage-based legitimacy with managerial and systemic forms of sustainability.

To ensure analytical transparency, illustrative quotations are drawn from corporate websites and interpreted as expressions of intended brand identity rather than of operational performance. Taken together, the three stages present a cumulative interpretive argument that progresses from detailed textual analysis (Stage One) to cross-case synthesis (Stage Two) and ultimately to conceptual abstraction (Stage Three). The following sections present these findings and set the stage for the theoretical discussion that follows.

4.1 Element-Level Analysis of Sustainability Meanings (Stage One)

Guided by the Corporate Brand Identity Matrix (CBIM) and its adaptation as the Family Firm Sustainability Brand Identity Matrix (FFSBIM), this stage examines how sustainability is articulated across the nine elements of brand identity. For each element, the analysis examines how sustainability meanings are constructed, and how familiness, the presence of family identity, values, and heritage, is made visible. Across the 25 firms, three recurring sustainability orientations ("logics") emerged within each element, forming a gradient that moves from Moral Stewardship through Translational Familiness, to Systemic Professionalization. While three dominant orientations were identified for each element, they are interpretive clusters rather than exhaustive or mutually exclusive categories, derived through iterative coding, pattern comparison, and constant comparative analysis. These element-level logics are presented below for each FFSBIM element and summarized in Table 2. They are then synthesized in a cross-element interpretation, which provides the analytical foundation for the continuum model in Figure 2. In this study, "implicit familiness" refers to indirect cues of continuity, trust, or long-term orientation, whereas "invisible familiness" denotes cases where familiness is not discursively articulated, even though it remains structurally present through ownership and governance. The gradient described here is conceptual rather than temporal in nature. It reflects how sustainability meanings cluster along a moral–managerial spectrum across firms, rather than a chronological evolution within individual firms.

4.1.1 Mission and Vision

Mission and Vision statements define corporate purpose and long-term direction. Across the cases, three sustainability logics dominate these texts. The Stewardship–Continuity Logic presents sustainability as an intergenerational duty grounded in family heritage and responsibility to future generations. Familiness is explicit with the family name or lineage, which functions as a guarantor of authenticity and moral continuity. The Ethical–Responsibility Logic frames sustainability as a civic and moral obligation toward society and the natural environment. Familiness becomes implicit, conveyed through a tone of care and duty rather than direct reference. Ultimately, the Strategic–Modernization Logic redefines sustainability as a modernization agenda, serving as a catalyst for competitiveness and transformation in a rapidly evolving market. Familiness is not explicitly articulated, replaced by managerial vocabulary emphasizing performance and technological renewal.

4.1.2 Culture

The Culture element captures the lived norms and values that sustain organizational behavior. Three orientations emerge. The Values-Driven Stewardship Logic portrays sustainability as a moral continuity rooted in the virtues of the founder and family, such as trust, honesty, humility, and long-term care. Familiness is explicit, and culture functions as a moral community grounded in lineage. The Responsible–People Logic modernizes this ethos, translating familial care into contemporary Human Resources and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) language centered on inclusion, well-being, and respect. Familiness becomes implicit since the organization speaks as a caring collective rather than as a kin group. Third, the Progressive–Performance Logic recasts sustainability as a capability for learning, adaptability, and competitiveness. Familiness is not visible in the discourse, with cultural legitimacy deriving from professional excellence and innovation.

4.1.3 Competences

The Competences element addresses what the firm can do to enact sustainability. Across firms, three intertwined logics appear. The Technological–Operational Logic defines sustainability in terms of efficiency, innovation, and digital transformation. Familiness is not mentioned since legitimacy derives from technical mastery and system optimization. The Collaboration-Embedded Logic situates sustainability in long-term partnerships with suppliers, customers, and NGOs. Familiness is implicit here, resonating through trust and continuity values that underwrite cooperation. The Compliance–Legitimacy Logic articulates sustainability as adherence to external standards, thereby transforming moral claims into procedural evidence. Familiness recedes as responsibility is validated through external frameworks.

4.1.4 Core Values

The Core Values element functions as the normative charter of the brand, what the organization declares non-negotiable. Sustainability is articulated here through three-layer logics. The Heritage–Stewardship Logic grounds values in the family's legacy, emphasizing responsibility and sustainability as inherited duties to future generations. Familiness is explicit and serves as the moral source of legitimacy. The Moral–Constitutional Logic reframes sustainability in universal ethical terms, emphasizing human rights, dignity, and social responsibility. Familiness is implicit, resonating with a family ethos, but legitimacy now stems from shared norms rather than private lineage. Finally, the Strategic–Coherence Logic integrates sustainability with innovation, quality, and risk management, embedding ethics into corporate strategy. Familiness is not evident in this discourse, which emphasizes professionalized ESG language.

4.1.5 Personality

The Personality element translates sustainability into human traits, the moral temperament of the organization. Three recurring logics emerge. The Caring–Steward Logic projects warmth, empathy, and trust, presenting sustainability as benevolent guardianship. Here, familiness is explicit, frequently invoked through founder stories or family-oriented language that anchors the firm's moral character. The Entrepreneurial–Pioneer Logic redefines sustainability as courage, initiative, and transformation, emphasizing responsibility as a catalyst for progress. Familiness is sometimes tied to a pioneering heritage, sometimes professionalized as an innovative culture. The Principled–Professional Logic emphasizes integrity, fairness, inclusion, and safety, expressing sustainability as disciplined responsibility. Familiness becomes discursively invisible as universal ethics dominate the framing.

4.1.6 Expression

Expression represents how sustainability identity becomes visible through actions and communication. Three logics dominate. The Philanthropic–Heritage Logic promotes sustainability through foundations and cultural patronage, directly linking moral authority to the family name. Familiness is explicit and functions as a narrative of benevolence and continuity. The Collaborative–Activation Logic frames sustainability as joint action through partnerships and pledges, such as participation in multi-stakeholder alliances. Familiness is implicit, invoked to justify participation but secondary to collective legitimacy. Finally, the Institutionalized–Transparency Logic utilizes reporting, auditing, and certification to demonstrate responsibility. Familiness recedes from view since the expression is mediated by external metrics and governance systems.

4.1.7 Value Proposition

The Value Proposition element translates internal purpose into customer-facing benefits. Sustainability narratives here fall into three orientations. The Democratized–Sustainability Logic emphasizes accessibility, making sustainable choices more affordable. Familiness is implicit, serving as a silent guarantor of trust. The Performance-Through-Sustainability Logic frames responsibility in terms of product excellence, emphasizing durability, efficiency, and repairability as key economic values. Familiness is overshadowed by engineering and functional rhetoric. The System–Transition–Partner Logic situates firms as enablers of broader decarbonization and circular economy transitions, providing technologies and solutions that help others reduce impact. Familiness becomes discursively invisible here, as legitimacy derives from technological leadership rather than heritage.

4.1.8 Relationships

Relationships reflect how firms structure their responsibilities to employees, partners, and the broader community. Three logics predominate. The Relational–Stewardship Logic portrays relationships as trust-based moral bonds, emphasizing "family spirit," "good neighbor," and long-term reciprocity. Familiness is explicit in kinship language, which legitimizes care and loyalty. The Governance-Embedded Partnership Logic codifies responsibility through supplier codes, due diligence, and integrity systems, translating ethics into procedures. Familiness becomes implicit since legitimacy arises from standards rather than lineage. The Collaborative–Network Logic extends relationships to multi-stakeholder partnerships, industry alliances, and NGO collaborations. Familiness appears symbolically as a heritage rationale but is subordinated to network legitimacy.

4.1.9 Position

The Position element expresses how firms publicly define their sustainability commitments and strategic stance. Three interconnected logics emerge. The Science-Anchored Accountability Logic aligns firms with climate science, setting time-bound and scope-specific targets that are validated through external frameworks. Familiness is implicit, invoked to justify ambition, while science and disclosure anchor credibility. Next, the Sustainability-as-Strategy Logic positions responsibility as a competitive advantage and a license to operate, and sustainability as a growth driver and a reputational safeguard. Familiness is invisible since the discourse is managerial and performance-based. Finally, the Integrity-First Decarbonization Logic prioritizes avoidance and reduction before compensation, emphasizing circularity and lifecycle considerations. Familiness appears occasionally as a moral impetus but not as proof of credibility.

4.1.10 Cross-Element Synthesis

Across the nine FFSBIM elements, sustainability narratives collectively reveal a structured progression from values-based moral conviction to science-anchored managerial accountability. Familiness is strongest and most explicit in the identity-proximate elements—Mission and Vision, Culture, Core Values, and Personality—which articulate sustainability as stewardship, responsibility, and intergenerational duty. These elements form the Moral Stewardship zone of the continuum. Familiness becomes more muted in Expression, Relationships, and Value Proposition. Across these elements, sustainability is translated into relational credibility, stakeholder engagement, and customer-facing benefits. Familiness remains present but becomes symbolically embedded, supporting trust and authenticity without being foregrounded. These elements constitute the Translational Familiness zone. In the system-oriented elements—Competences and Position—familiness visibility largely recedes. Sustainability is framed instead through capabilities, science-based targets, due diligence structures, and governance frameworks. These elements anchor the Systemic Professionalization zone, where legitimacy derives from technical expertise, transparency, and institutional compliance.

Together, these patterns demonstrate a coherent institutional trajectory. Sustainability evolves from a moral ideal rooted in family ethics to a managerial and science-based system of accountability, while familiness shifts from an explicit moral anchor to a background source of legitimacy. This three-zone continuum (see Figure 2) forms the conceptual foundation for the cross-case configurations developed in Stage Two and the ideal types developed in Stage Three. Stage Two then examines how firms combine these logics into coherent brand identity configurations.

4.2 Cross-Case Configurations of Sustainability–Familiness Integration (Stage Two)

Stage Two shifts the analysis from the element-level patterns identified in Stage One to the holistic level of firm identity. Whereas Stage One examined how sustainability meanings appear within each FFSBIM element, Stage Two investigates how these meanings combine across internal, bridging, and external brand identity elements to form firm-level configurations. Using Eisenhardt's (1989) comparative logic and Kluge's (2000) interpretive typology approach, each firm was first treated as an internally coherent configuration of sustainability meanings and familiness cues. These individual configurations were then compared across the 25 firms to identify recurring patterns of how moral heritage and managerial structures cohere into distinctive brand identity systems.

The resulting five configurations do not represent fixed categories but empirical synthesis patterns that illuminate how firms stabilize coherence between inherited family values and professionalized sustainability practices. Table 3 summarizes these configurations, after they are discussed in detail below. Some configurations correspond partly to sectoral conditions, such as retailers in Market-Embedded Responsibility and resource-intensive firms in Institutionalized–Responsible Operations, reflecting how sustainability discourse is shaped by industry-specific contexts.

4.2.1 Configuration 1: Moral–Heritage Sustainability

Moral–Heritage Sustainability firms such as Deichmann, Dr. Oetker, and Tchibo portray sustainability as a moral responsibility inseparable from their heritage. Familiness is highly visible and often expressed through explicit moral or faith-based language. Deichmann's maxim, "The company must serve the people," encapsulates the Christian values of its founding family. It further states, "Making a profit is not an end in itself for us," justifying profitability only when it benefits society. Dr. Oetker's vision, "We think in terms of

Table 2: Summary of Sustainability Logics by FFSBIM Elements

FFSBIM Element	Dominant Logics	Familiness Visibility	Primary Function of Familiness
Mission & Vision	Stewardship–Continuity Logic; Ethical–Responsibility Logic; Strategic–Modernization Logic	Explicit → Invisible	Moral
Culture	Values-Driven Stewardship Logic; Responsible–People Logic; Progressive–Performance Logic	Explicit → Invisible	Moral / Strategic
Competences	Technological–Operational Logic; Collaboration-Embedded Logic; Compliance–Legitimacy Logic	Implicit → Invisible	Strategic
Core Values	Heritage–Stewardship Logic; Moral–Constitutional Logic; Strategic–Coherence Logic	Explicit → Invisible	Moral
Personality	Caring–Steward Logic; Entrepreneurial–Pioneer Logic; Principled–Professional Logic	Explicit → Invisible	Moral
Expression	Philanthropic–Heritage Logic; Collaborative–Activation Logic; Institutionalized–Transparency Logic	Explicit → Invisible	Moral / Symbolic
Value Proposition	Democratized–Sustainability Logic; Performance-Through-Sustainability Logic; System–Transition–Partner Logic	Implicit → Invisible	Strategic
Relationships	Relational–Stewardship Logic; Governance-Embedded Partnership Logic; Collaborative–Network Logic	Explicit → Invisible	Symbolic / Strategic
Position	Science-Anchored Accountability Logic; Sustainability-as-Strategy Logic; Integrity-First Decarbonization Logic	Implicit → Invisible	Strategic

Note. The table summarizes the dominant sustainability logics, the visibility of familiness, and the primary functions of familiness identified across the nine FFSBIM elements in the 25 German private family firms.

generations, not just until the end of the quarter," defines sustainability as an ethical extension of family duty. Tchibo connects responsibility and trust to its founders' beliefs: "We must take responsibility and act responsibly," describing sustainability as part of their identity as a Hanseatic family firm. In these firms, sustainability communication does not rely on technical proof but on moral consistency. Reports and certifications are treated as confirmations of virtue rather than sources of legitimacy. The corporate brand acts as a moral compass, with continuity, fairness, and service defining authenticity. The coherence between internal values and external communication forms the basis of credibility. The family's moral authority legitimizes sustainability as a lived conviction rather than as a marketing stance.

4.2.2 Configuration 2: Market-Embedded Responsibility

The Market-Embedded Responsibility configuration, represented by ALDI SOUTH Group, Schwarz Group, and Premium Food Group, translates ethical intent into disciplined routines and managerial efficiency. ALDI SOUTH Group's mission, "Making sustainability affordable for our customers," embodies a pragmatic moral economy that fosters responsibility through accessibility. Premium Food Group aligns responsibility and modernization: "From animal husbandry to processing and packaging, we implement sustainable and resource-efficient processes." Schwarz Group emphasizes its position on efficiency: "With our leading ecosystem, we take a holistic approach to climate protection." Familiness is implicit, operating as the historical rationale for prudence rather than an explicit theme. Ethics are demonstrated through measurable standards such

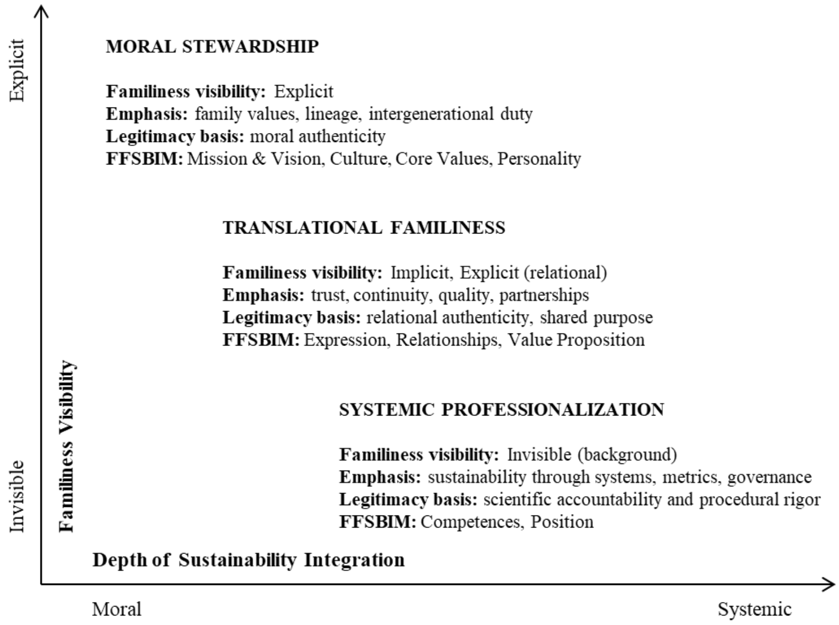

Figure 2: Continuum of Sustainability–Familiness Integration in Family Firm Branding

Note. The figure illustrates the progression from Moral Stewardship (values-based with explicit familiness) through Translational Familiness (organizationally embedded and relationally mediated) to Systemic Professionalization (science-based and institutionalized). The diagonal flow shows how sustainability evolves from a moral identity claim to a form of managerial accountability, while familiness shifts from an explicit moral anchor to a background source of legitimacy.

as supplier codes, energy targets, and deforestation-free sourcing rather than emotional rhetoric. This configuration illustrates how long-term orientation and thrift evolve into an ethic of efficiency, where sustainability is achieved through control, consistency, and fairness embedded in everyday operations.

4.2.3 Configuration 3: Innovation-Led Sustainability Integration

This configuration encompasses firms such as Voith, Bosch, and STIHL, where sustainability and innovation converge to form an engineering ethic. Voith's mission, "Developing sustainable technologies for future generations," embodies the concept of continuous innovation. Bosch's credo, "Invented for life," fuses technological mastery with social conscience by further stating its mission "to develop hardware and software technology that's accessible to all, improves people's quality of life and uses natural resources responsibly." STIHL's guiding statement, as stated by its founder, "Making it easier for people to work in and with nature," captures sustainability as a harmonious coexistence with the environment. Familiness legitimizes technological ambition by anchoring innovation in moral continuity. The family name signals trust, while engineering provides verification. Sustainability is integral to product design here, encompassing durability, repairability, and energy efficiency, rather than relying on external philanthropy. These firms exemplify how a moral heritage can evolve into a science-based ethic, rendering technological precision a moral act.

4.2.4 Configuration 4: Collaborative Responsibility Framework

Firms such as HELM, Würth, DACHSER Group, and Intersnack Group articulate sustainability as a shared responsibility rooted in trust, care, and partnership. HELM's emphasis on its sustainable alliances and partnerships for social initiatives expresses a collective responsibility. Würth's pledge: "Everyone benefits from the growth," links economic and social well-being by humbling itself as "customers' employees." DACHSER Group emphasizes "a culture of collaboration" in alliances with NGOs such as terre des hommes, as "a global company with heart." Intersnack Group describes its journey as "building supplier capacity and giving back to the communities we call home," highlighting its role as a long-term partner. Familiness visibility ranges from explicit to implicit, although it is expressed through empathy and inclusivity rather than lineage. These firms extend familial care into professional collaboration, where respect and dialogue replace paternalism. Würth's cultural foundations, HELM's global volunteering, and DACHSER Group's community projects illustrate this outward-looking familiness. Their legitimacy stems from authentic engagement and shared value creation, even as responsibility becomes distributed across networks.

4.2.5 Configuration 5: Institutionalized–Responsible Operations

Firms such as HOYER, Messer, DS Group, and Brose Group embody Institutionalized–Responsible Operations, where sustainability is framed as guardianship and vigilance. HOYER declares, “Safety always has top priority, and is a central value of the HOYER Group,” uniting care and control. Messer positions itself as a moral infrastructure provider: “As an energy-intensive company producing and trading industrial gases essential to life, Messer has responsibilities and is committed to environmental and climate protection.” Brose Group asserts its commitment to “deploying resources ecologically and efficiently along the entire value-added chain,” showing sustainability enacted as a process discipline. DS Group’s motto, “Making tomorrow better than today,” describes stewardship as transformation through continuity. Familiness is institutionalized in governance systems rather than personal narratives, although it is sometimes expressed explicitly. Ethical duty is translated into compliance structures such as audits, standards, and whistleblower systems that formalize care. These firms provide reassurance in high-risk contexts, converting moral vigilance into procedural reliability. Institutionalized–Responsible Operations thus represent the professionalized face of family ethics, where responsibility is sustained through systematized prudence.

4.2.6 Cross-Configuration Reflection

Across the five configurations, familiness functions as a translation mechanism, reinterpreting inherited values through contemporary organizational language. Moral–Heritage Sustainability retains familiness as an explicit moral voice; Market-Embedded Responsibility embeds it within disciplined routines; Innovation-Led Sustainability Integration transforms it into an engineering ethic; Collaborative Responsibility Framework extends it into relational trust and shared engagement; and Institutionalized–Responsible Operations embeds familiness within governance systems and procedural vigilance. These variations also indicate that family firms do not primarily differ in their level of sustainability commitment, but rather in where sustainability becomes meaningful within their brand identity system, whether rooted in values, routines, products, partnerships, or risk management structures. At the same time, the boundaries between configurations are porous, reflecting the hybrid and evolving nature of sustainability discourse in family firms.

Taken together, the five configurations align closely with the sustainability–familiness continuum derived in Stage One. Moral–Heritage Sustainability corresponds to the Moral Stewardship end of the continuum, characterized by explicit familiness and values-based sustainability. Market-Embedded Responsibility and Collaborative Responsibility Framework sit within the middle zone of Translational Familiness, where heritage-based commitments are reinterpreted as operational consistency or relational credibility. Innovation-Led Sustainability Integration and Institutionalized–Responsible Operations map onto Systemic Professionalization, where familiness functions as background support even when it is explicitly expressed in social responsibility discourse. Sustainability becomes anchored in innovation systems, governance structures, and science-based accountability. This mapping illustrates how the empirical patterns of Stage Two serve as a conceptual bridge between the element-level gradient of Stage One and the ideal-type abstractions developed in Stage Three. It clarifies the process through which family firms convert moral heritage into modernized, institutionalized sustainability practices, providing the foundation for the typology developed in the next section.

4.3 Ideal Types of Sustainability–Familiness Integration (Stage Three)

Following Kluge’s (2000) typology-building process and Eisenhardt’s (1989) logic of cross-case comparison, Stage Three moves from the empirical configurations identified in Stage Two to theoretically saturated ideal types. Whereas Stage Two synthesized how sustainability logics clustered at the firm level, Stage Three abstracts these patterns into conceptually distinct forms of sustainability–familiness integration. Two analytical dimensions guided this abstraction, both grounded in the patterns revealed in Stages One and Two. The first is familiness visibility, which appears in four modes across the cases: explicit, semi-explicit, implicit, and institutionalized. The second is the depth of sustainability integration, ranging from normative to managerial and from managerial to systemic. These dimensions were derived inductively from Stages One and Two, making them data-grounded rather than theoretically prespecified. Ideal types represent dominant patterns rather than exhaustive descriptions; firms naturally exhibit hybrid characteristics, which are simplified here to allow for conceptual clarity.

Positioning the 25 firms along these two dimensions produced five internally coherent and externally distinctive ideal types (see Figure 3). Each type reflects a stable combination of how firms draw on moral heritage, how they modernize sustainability practices, and how they frame responsibility in their branding discourse. Importantly, familiness does not fade across types; instead, it shifts in form and function—from explicit lineage-based grounding (Type A) to semi-explicit continuity (Type B), to implicit trust cues (Type C), to institutionalized governance structures (Type D), and to an explicit and future-oriented, strategically modernized form (Type E). Because ideal types synthesize multiple element-level logics, familiness visibility at the firm level may differ from the visibility within individual FFSBIM elements (e.g., Competences). Ideal types, therefore, capture dominant, cross-element patterns rather than direct aggregations of element-level coding. The resulting typology provides a conceptual framework for understanding how family firms navigate the relationship between familiness and sustainability in response to evolving stakeholder expectations. The vertical axis in Figure 3 captures differences in familiness visibility, from explicit (top) to institutionalized (bottom). Likewise, the horizontal axis reflects the depth and scope of sus-

Table 3: Cross-Case Configurations of Sustainability–Familiness Integration

Configuration	Integrative Core	Familiness	Primary Function of Familiness	Representative Firms
Moral–Heritage Sustainability	Moral duty anchored in lineage, faith, and inherited ethical conviction	Explicit	Moral	The Gebr. Heinemann Group, Deichmann, Tchibo, Miele, Dr. Oetker, Bosch
Market-Embedded Responsibility	Responsibility embedded in disciplined, affordable, and efficiency-oriented routines	Implicit	Symbolic	Schwarz Group, ALDI SOUTH Group, Premium Food Group
Innovation-Led Sustainability Integration	Sustainability enacted as an engineering-driven ethic of technological progress	Explicit to Implicit	Moral / Strategic	Miele, Schaeffler, Bosch, Voith, STIHL, TRUMPF
Collaborative Responsibility Framework	Legitimacy grounded in relational trust, partnership, collaboration, and shared responsibility	Explicit to Implicit	Moral / Symbolic	Intersnack Group, HELM, Freudenberg, DRÄXLMAIER Group, DACHSER Group, Würth
Institutionalized–Responsible Operations	Sustainability secured through compliance systems, operational reliability, and institutionalized stewardship	Explicit to Institutionalized	Symbolic / Strategic	Premium Food Group, Brose Group, HOYER, Messer, CRONIMET, Vaillant Group, DS Group

Note. These configurations are empirical synthesis patterns, not ideal types. They serve as the interpretive bridge between element-level logics (Stage One) and the ideal-typical abstractions developed in Stage Three. Because configurations reflect how sustainability logics cluster across elements, firms may legitimately appear in more than one pattern; these overlaps reflect empirical complexity rather than analytical inconsistency.

tainability integration, ranging from normative (left) to systemic (right). Taken together, these types demonstrate a plurality of familiness modes rather than a linear developmental sequence.

4.3.1 Type A: Inherited Stewardship Firms

In this type, sustainability is understood as an inherited moral duty rooted in family values and a sense of responsibility toward future generations. Familiness is explicit and functions as the main source of legitimacy. These firms embed stewardship principles throughout their Mission and Vision, Culture, and Core Values, treating sustainability as an extension of the founding family's or founder's ethical worldview. The moral language of responsibility, trust, and care defines both internal culture and external communication. Evidence of sustainability comes less from data than from consistency between words and actions. For instance, Bosch declares its founder's statement, "Never forget your humanity, and respect human dignity in your dealings with others." Miele's philosophy is similarly reflected in its statement: "Our responsibility doesn't end at the factory gate." The Gebr. Heinemann Group further affirms its position: "As a family business, we are leading the way in sustainability." These statements express ethics as identity rather than compliance. Other representative firms are Tchibo, Dr. Oetker, and Deichmann. These firms consistently present sustainability as a continuation of long-standing family ethics. The strength of this type lies in its moral credibility; however, the potential risk is a tendency toward self-assuming virtue, where integrity is presumed rather than evidenced.

4.3.2 Type B: Techno-Strategic Stewardship Firms

For these firms, sustainability represents a strategic approach to transformation, driving technological progress and long-term competitiveness. Familiness still matters but takes a supporting role, offering continuity and trust as firms modernize their business models. Sustainability is expressed through innovation, efficiency, and measurable results. For example, Schaeffler emphasizes its strategy: "From 2025, Schaeffler will purchase 100,000 metric tons per year of the steel made using a virtually CO_2-free process by the Swedish startup H2greensteel." Similarly, Voith states, "Industrial sustainability is our business model," highlighting its focus on hydropower, resource-efficient paper facilities, and drivetrain electrification. TRUMPF highlights its carbon-neutral production with the statement, "We have been producing on a carbon-neutral basis since 2020." These firms demonstrate that legitimacy rests on science-based targets and technological outcomes rather than heritage alone. Familiness reassures stakeholders during transitions, while performance delivers proof. This type subsumes the engineering-oriented sustainability logic identified in Stage Two's Innovation-Led

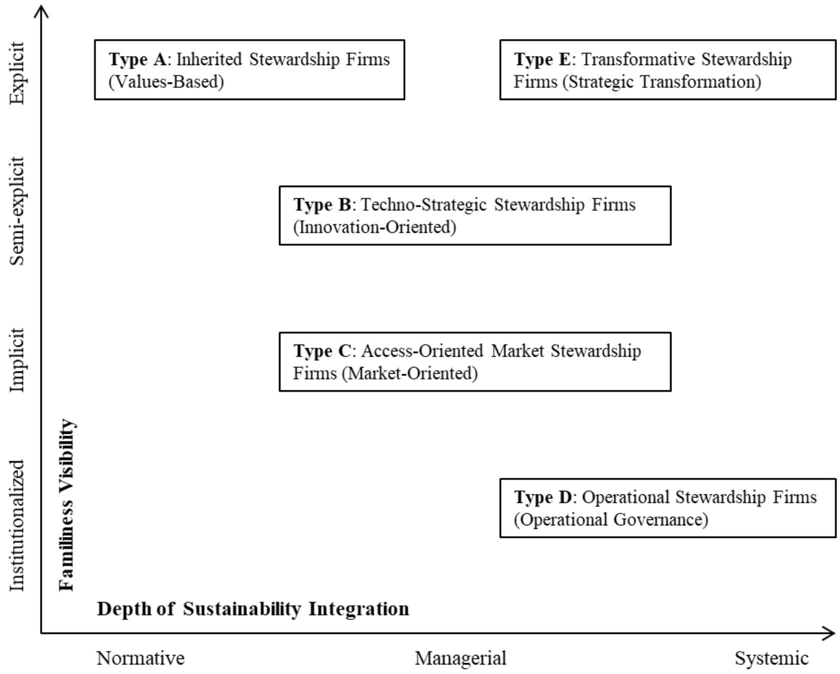

Figure 3: Typology of Sustainability–Familiness Integration in Family Firm Branding

Sustainability Integration configuration, extending it toward a more strategic framing. STIHL also demonstrates this technology- and performance-oriented integration. The risk of this approach is that sustainability becomes more of a technical mandate than a moral conviction.

4.3.3 Type C: Access-Oriented Market Stewardship Firms

This type frames sustainability as access and fairness, making responsible products available and affordable to all. Familiness can be implicitly observed in the discourse as a guarantor of reliability, rather than as an explicit moral authority. Retailers such as ALDI SOUTH Group and Schwarz Group express sustainability in direct, customer-focused language. For instance, ALDI SOUTH Group declares its mission, "Making sustainability affordable for our customers," by aiming to offer sustainable products at the best price for everyone. Similarly, Schwarz Group adds, "With zero percent price difference between plant-based proteins and comparable animal products, we are creating equality on the plate at Lidl and Kaufland in Germany." Intersnack Group also exemplifies this type by anchoring sustainability in consumer responsibility, offering healthy snacks that do not compromise on taste. Their emphasis lies on efficiency, affordability, and inclusion rather than heritage. Sustainability becomes a shared right rather than a moral calling. This pattern is most evident in the above firms since they position sustainable choices as mainstream offerings. The strength of this model lies in its broad social reach, as it normalizes sustainable consumption for everyday consumers. However, the moral depth of the message can fade when sustainability is equated primarily with price parity or convenience.

4.3.4 Type D: Operational Stewardship Firms

Operational Stewardship Firms focus on operational reliability, safety, and compliance. They view sustainability as a structured process, managed through systems and standards. Familiness is less about personal lineage and more about institutionalized long-term-oriented governance and safety systems, even when it is only slightly visible in the sustainability discourse. For example, HOYER states, "Safety always has top priority, and is a central value of the HOYER Group," by emphasizing its certifications. Messer commits to reducing emissions by stating, "We have set ourselves a target to reduce the emissions intensity of our worldwide activities (plants and logistics) by 40 percent by 2030 compared with a 2019 baseline." CRONIMET highlights the rollout of its certified CRONIMET Envirotec energy efficiency program as evidence of its sustainable business model. These firms, which operate in resource-intensive industries, equate sustainability with assurance and precision, adhering to legal regulations and standards. Moreover, Premium Food Group and Brose Group can also be considered in this type due to their strong focus on resource-efficient processes and sustainable corporate policy. The strength of this type lies in its consistency and transparency, while the limitation is that sustainability can appear as a language of compliance and policy rather than a shared conviction.

4.3.5 Type E: Transformative Stewardship Firms

Transformative Stewardship Firms combine an ethical heritage with professional management, striking a balance between long-term family values and innovation. Familiness remains explicit but is expressed in a modern, reflective tone. DS Group articulates this clearly: "As a family business, we think in generations – and have been doing so for over 100 years," followed by its position statement: "By 2045, the DS Group will have completely converted its core business to future-proof products and services." Vaillant Group aims to halve CO_2 emissions by 2030 with its strategic program: "The Vaillant Group's SEEDS sustainability program defines ambitious targets and concrete measures for the focus fields of Environment, Employees, Development & Solutions and Society." It is aligned with its nature as "a family business with a vision: 'Taking care of a better climate. Inside each home and the world around it.'" Würth extends this idea to cultural patronage and community responsibility, while simultaneously stating, "In the long term, the circular economy should be inextricably linked to the Würth brand." Freudenberg expresses sustainability by combining its family values with technical innovation, while DRÄXLMAIER Group links technological progress with family continuity. In these firms, sustainability is both a moral commitment and a transformation agenda. Data and systems provide credibility, while heritage offers meaning and context. The challenge of this type lies in ensuring intergenerational continuity since long-range goals depend on successors who maintain the same ethical and strategic balance. This hybrid logic is also evident in HELM and DACHSER Group.

4.3.6 Comparative Interpretation

Together, the five ideal types demonstrate diverse but interconnected ways in which family firms integrate sustainability and familiness (see Table 4). Type A (Inherited Stewardship Firms) embodies explicit familiness, where sustainability is framed through lineage, moral conviction, and intergenerational responsibility. Type B (Techno-Strategic Stewardship Firms) represents a semi-explicit familiness mode: the family remains present as a moral anchor, but innovation and technological progress increasingly shape the meaning of sustainability. Type C (Access-Oriented Market Stewardship Firms) displays implicit familiness, where trust in the family firm underlies a market-oriented, affordability-based understanding of responsibility.

Type D (Operational Stewardship Firms) illustrates a further shift: familiness becomes institutionalized within systems of governance, safety, and compliance rather than expressed through lineage. Finally, Type E (Transformative Stewardship Firms) also exhibits explicit familiness, but in a forward-looking form. Here, familiness is expressed through long-term transformation agendas, succession-linked commitments, climate targets, and strategic renewal. Type E demonstrates that explicit familiness can coexist with advanced, systemic sustainability integration when it is articulated as an intergenerational strategy. Firms such as Würth and Freudenberg are positioned in Type E because their collaborative practices are explicitly framed as part of an intergenerational transformation and strategic renewal, rather than as stand-alone relational legitimacy mechanisms.

Types A, B, and C align closely with Stage One's progression from Moral Stewardship to Translational Familiness: sustainability meanings shift from values-based to relational or efficiency-based, and familiness gradually becomes less directly articulated. Types D and E reflect Systemic Professionalization identified in Stage One and the structured patterns observed in Stage Two. Type D corresponds to the configuration where sustainability is operationalized through compliance, risk management, and reliability systems. Whereas Type E captures firms that have forward-looking, transformation-focused positioning, revitalizing familiness in a modern, strategic vocabulary. Thus, Type E represents explicit familiness of a future-oriented kind, distinct from Type A's heritage-rooted explicitness.

Across all types, familiness does not diminish but reconfigures in function, shifting from a moral source of identity (Type A), to a cultural or continuity resource (Type B), to a background trust cue (Type C), to an embedded governance logic (Type D), and finally to a strategic intergenerational commitment (Type E). This aligns with Stage Two's finding that familiness acts as a translation mechanism, adapting to stakeholder expectations while retaining its underlying normative meaning. The typology, therefore, reinforces the interpretivist view that sustainability and familiness co-evolve as discursive resources. In values-oriented forms, heritage humanizes sustainability; in more systemized forms, sustainability modernizes heritage by embedding it in measurable frameworks and long-term strategies. The interplay between these two brand identity resources, heritage and system, constitutes the moral economy of family firm branding.

5 Discussion

This discussion examines how large German private family firms integrate sustainability into their corporate brand identities and how familiness shapes these constructions. Using the Family Firm Sustainability Brand Identity Matrix (FFSBIM) as a brand identity framework, the chapter synthesizes the findings from all empirical stages to articulate the interplay between sustainability, familiness, and legitimacy in family firm brand identity work. Situated within research on corporate brand identity (Balmer, 1995, 2008; Urde, 2009, 2013), CSR communication and legitimacy (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Deegan, 2002; Hooghiemstra, 2000), and family firm identity and socioemotional wealth (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007; Habbershon & Williams, 1999; Zellweger et al., 2010), the analysis shows that sustainability is not a singular strategic position but a multi-layered system shaped by heritage, organizational capabilities, and institutional pressures. Familiness emerges as a dynamic brand identity and legitimacy resource that shifts in visibility depending on the sustainability domain addressed. Across the sample firms, sustainability is mobilized to articulate organizational purpose, justify strategic decisions, and manage stakeholder relationships. It appears in identity-proximate brand identity elements as moral stewardship, in relational elements as trust-based responsibility, and in systemic elements as

Table 4: Comparative Summary of Sustainability–Familiness Integration Types

Type	Core Logic	Familiness	Representative Industries	Representative Firms
Inherited Stewardship Firms (A)	Stewardship as an inherited moral duty	Explicit	Retail, Consumer Products, Advanced Manufacturing	The Gebr. Heinemann Group, Deichmann, Tchibo, Miele, Dr. Oetker, Bosch
Techno-Strategic Stewardship Firms (B)	Sustainability as innovation-driven transformation	Semi-explicit	Mobility, Advanced Manufacturing	Schaeffler, Voith, STIHL, TRUMPF
Access-Oriented Market Stewardship Firms (C)	Sustainability as affordable access and consumer fairness	Implicit	Retail, Consumer Products	Schwarz Group, ALDI SOUTH Group, Intersnack Group
Operational Stewardship Firms (D)	Sustainability as system-driven safety, compliance, and reliability	Institutionalized	Retail, Mobility, Resource-Intensive	Premium Food Group, Brose Group, HOYER, Messer, CRONIMET
Transformative Stewardship Firms (E)	Sustainability as intergenerational strategic transformation	Explicit	Consumer Products, Mobility, Advanced Manufacturing, Resource-Intensive	HELM, Freudenberg, DRÄXLMAIER Group, DACHSER Group, Würth, Vaillant Group, DS Group

Note. Because ideal types abstract from empirical variation, firms with hybrid features are assigned to the type that best reflects their dominant pattern of sustainability–familiness integration. Some firms, therefore, appear in only one ideal type even if they display multiple configuration logics in Stage Two; this reflects the move from empirical overlap to conceptual parsimony.

science-anchored accountability. Although sustainability becomes increasingly professionalized, familiness does not diminish; instead, it adapts to the type of brand identity work at stake. The following sections of this chapter interpret these brand identity dynamics in relation to the empirical stages and the relevant theoretical debates.

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The first central insight concerns the differentiated meanings of sustainability across the corporate brand identity architecture. Internal brand identity elements, including Mission and Vision, Core Values, Culture, and Personality, tend to frame sustainability through moral and intergenerational narratives that emphasize responsibility, stewardship, prudence, and long-term orientation. These narratives echo the stewardship logic articulated by Miller and Le Breton-Miller (2005) as well as the socioemotional wealth perspective, which highlights the non-economic goals and long-term time horizons of family firms (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). In these internal elements, sustainability reinforces identity continuity by positioning responsibility as an extension of the family's ethos and traditions. In contrast, sustainability expressed in external or market-facing brand identity elements—such as Value Proposition, Relationships, and Position—assumes more instrumental, performance-oriented meanings. Firms highlight affordability, innovation, efficiency, science-based targets, and compliance, indicating a managerialized interpretation of sustainability consistent with McWilliams et al.'s (2006) view of CSR as a strategic investment. This pattern aligns with Matten and Moon's (2008) distinction between implicit CSR, grounded in cultural norms, and explicit CSR, formalized through reporting, metrics, and accountability systems. Many firms articulate sustainability through engineering competence, certification regimes, or technological differentiation, suggesting that sustainability increasingly operates as a strategic and legitimacy-enhancing resource. Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that sustainability is a multifaceted construct that shifts in meaning from values-driven to instrumental and systemic, depending on the brand identity element being addressed. This layered configuration supports Balmer's (2008) assertion that effective corporate identity work integrates internal values with external expectations. Family firms navigate this integration by presenting sustainability both as a normative commitment rooted in heritage and as a managerial practice aligned with institutional pressures.

A second key insight is that familiness shifts in visibility and function across brand identity elements, operating as a flexible legitimacy resource rather than a static attribute. Familiness is most explicit in identity-proximate elements, where firms reference lineage, founder values, and intergenerational responsibility. In these contexts, familiness anchors sustainability in authenticity and ethical legitimacy, consistent with research showing that family firms enjoy credibility when they foreground moral stewardship and heritage (Deephouse & Jaskiewicz, 2013; Zellweger et al., 2010). These expressions mirror Berrone et al.'s (2010) findings that socioemotional wealth preservation motivates reputation-protective behavior and intergenerational responsibility. As sustainability narratives shift towards relational elements, familiness becomes more implicit, serving as a trust cue embedded in stakeholder relationships. Firms emphasize reliability, continuity, and quality without explicitly foregrounding family ownership, consistent with research on strategic modulation of familiness visibility (Botero et al., 2013; Micelotta & Raynard, 2011). In systemic elements, both internal and external, familiness is institutionalized in governance structures, risk management routines, and long-term strategic commitments rather than being explicitly communicated. This institutionalized familiness aligns with Balmer and Greyser's (2002) identity alignment principle, in which firms reduce the risk of legitimacy loss by aligning communicated identity claims with audited performance. It also reflects Ashforth and Gibbs' (1990) observation that organizations adopt procedural legitimacy strategies in highly regulated environments.

The study also highlights the discursive construction of sustainability and familiness. Corporate websites, as argued by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000), are not neutral communication channels but arenas where meaning is constructed. Firms use sustainability discourse to narrate purpose, justify strategic action, and signal alignment with societal expectations. The patterns observed align with Deegan's (2002) typology of legitimacy strategies, ranging from moral legitimacy, grounded in values, to pragmatic legitimacy, grounded in stakeholder benefits, and cognitive legitimacy, grounded in standardized systems, reporting frameworks, and third-party verification. Familiness mediates the institutionalization of sustainability by providing interpretive continuity: even firms with highly formalized systems frame their sustainability commitments through long-term orientation or intergenerational logic, linking new practices to enduring values (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

These findings cohere in the moral–systemic continuum developed in Stage One. This continuum captures how the meanings of sustainability shift from moral stewardship to relational responsibility and to systemic professionalization. While the progression resembles Deegan's (2002) distinction from normative to pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy, the findings show that moral legitimacy persists even as sustainability becomes more formalized. Firms routinely justify system-based practices, such as science-based targets, through intergenerational commitments, suggesting that normative and system-based legitimacy reinforce each other rather than substitute for one another. Familiness shifts accordingly: explicit in the moral zone, implicit or symbolic in the relational zone, and institutionalized in systemic contexts. This pattern supports Whetten and Mackey's (2002) understanding of organizational identity as both enduring and elastic. The continuum is not linear; rather, it illustrates a discursive field from which firms selectively draw.

Stage Two revealed five cross-case configurations—Moral–Heritage Sustainability, Market-Embedded Responsibility, Innovation-Led Sustainability Integration, Collaborative Responsibility Framework, and Institutionalized–Responsible Operations—that represent different ways in which firms assemble sustainability meanings and familiness expressions into coherent brand identity systems. Coherence is achieved not through uniform sustainability practices but through alignment across brand identity elements. This corresponds to Astrachan et al.'s (2018) conceptualization of family firm identity as a constellation of interacting dimensions. The configurations illuminate different legitimacy orientations and distinct contributions of familiness, ranging from moral grounding to symbolic trust-building, operational discipline, and governance stability. These configurations anticipate the five ideal-typical brand identity models identified in Stage Three.

The ideal types—Inherited Stewardship Firms (A), Techno-Strategic Stewardship Firms (B), Access-Oriented Market Stewardship Firms (C), Operational Stewardship Firms (D), and Transformative Stewardship Firms (E)—further clarify the interaction between sustainability and familiness. The types vary along two dimensions: the visibility of familiness and the depth of sustainability integration. Type A firms prioritize heritage-based moral responsibility, consistent with earlier findings that family firms rely on stewardship and moral authority (Zellweger et al., 2010). Type B firms link technological innovation to long-term orientation, extending research on patient capital and innovation in family firms (Sirmon & Hitt, 2003). Type C firms emphasize affordability and accessibility, relying on implicit trust associated with familiness (T. J. Brown & Dacin, 1997). Type D firms institutionalize responsibility in governance processes, reflecting the procedural legitimacy strategies identified by Ashforth and Gibbs (1990). Type E firms combine strong identity narratives with formalized sustainability systems, supporting Urde's (2009) argument that heritage can serve as a forward-looking strategic resource. Collectively, these ideal types demonstrate that familiness is not displaced by professionalization but is reconfigured across sustainability domains, functioning as a multifaceted legitimacy resource.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of these findings are significant. The study extends identity-based corporate branding theory by demonstrating how, in large private family firms, sustainability can operate as an identity-defining construct embedded across internal, bridging, and external brand identity dimensions. It deepens Balmer and Greyser's (2002) architecture of multiple identity types by illustrating how sustainability shapes the alignment between internal beliefs, communicated identity, and stakeholder expectations. It also advances Urde's (2009) brand-oriented framework by showing how sustainability commitments are increasingly articulated as brand-level promises grounded in enduring values. The study further extends the conceptualization of familiness as a dynamic brand identity resource whose visibility shifts between moral expression, symbolic trust cues, and institutionalized governance principles, depending on the sustainability domain, thereby advancing insights by Habbershon and Williams (1999) and Zellweger et al. (2010). It contributes to institutional theory by grounding the moral–systemic continuum in empirical patterns and demonstrating how family firms hybridize implicit and explicit CSR modes (Matten & Moon, 2008), as well as navigate normative, pragmatic, and cognitive legitimacy strategies (Deegan, 2002). Finally, the study underscores the performative role of sustainability discourse in identity construction, supporting Alvesson and Kärreman's (2000) argument that communication constitutes organizational realities. Sustainability narratives enable family firms to reconcile heritage with modernization and embed a long-term orientation within contemporary expectations for transparency and accountability. The ideal types developed in this study exemplify these theoretical extensions by translating the observed patterns of sustainability–familiness integration into analytically coherent brand identity models.

5.3 Managerial Implications

The managerial implications arising from these findings suggest that family firm leaders may benefit from anchoring sustainability in identity-proximate brand identity elements to ensure authenticity, while substantiating moral narratives with measurable practices to mitigate symbolic legitimacy risks (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). Leaders should calibrate familiness strategically—making it explicit when articulating moral commitments, implicit when emphasizing trust and reliability, institutionalized in regulated contexts, and modernized when communicating future-oriented transformation. Firms adopting systemic sustainability practices should link these practices to heritage-based values to avoid technocratic detachment, whereas firms rooted primarily in moral narratives should adopt more formalized routines to maintain credibility. Ensuring communication coherence across websites, reports, social media, and stakeholder dialogues is essential, as identity is shaped by both planned and unplanned communication (Karaosmanoglu & Melewar, 2006). The ideal types developed in the study can serve as diagnostic tools for assessing alignment between identity, strategy, and stakeholder expectations.

6 Conclusion

This study examined how large German private family firms integrate sustainability within their corporate brand identities and how familiness shapes the meanings, legitimacy strategies, and institutionalization of sustainability within these identities. Using the Family Firm Sustainability Brand Identity Matrix (FFSBIM) and an interpretivist research design, the study analyzed how sustainability is communicated across brand identity elements and how these expressions cohere into firm-level configurations and ideal-typical brand identity models. The analysis showed that sustainability is not a uniform concept, but a layered and context-dependent construct. In internal elements such as Mission and Vision, and Core Values, sustainability is framed as a moral or intergenerational duty grounded in family ethos and stewardship orientation, aligning with long-standing insights from family business scholarship. In the system-oriented internal element Competences, and market-oriented elements like Value Proposition and Position, sustainability becomes more managerial, instrumental, and systemic, expressed through innovation, compliance, and science-anchored accountability. These varied expressions form a gradient from values-driven to system-driven sustainability, accompanied by shifts in how familiness becomes visible and functional.

The three-stage analysis demonstrated how firms assemble these differentiated meaning structures into coherent brand identity systems. Stage One revealed three sustainability–familiness logics—Moral Stewardship, Translational Familiness, and Systemic Professionalization—that reflect different modes of meaning-making and legitimacy construction. Stage Two showed how these logics combine into distinct configurations shaped by industry conditions and identity architectures. Stage Three abstracted these configurations into five ideal types that capture relatively stable modes of integrating sustainability and familiness. Across these brand identity models, familiness does not decline as sustainability becomes more formalized; instead, it is reinterpreted and recontextualized. Familiness shifts from an explicit moral anchor to a relational trust cue, an institutionalized governance principle, or a future-oriented strategic orientation, depending on the context.

The findings offer three overarching insights. First, familiness functions as a dynamic, multifaceted legitimacy resource that enables firms to articulate sustainability in ways that are consistent with their identities and responsive to institutional pressures. Second, sustainability increasingly becomes institutionalized across brand identity dimensions as values are translated into structures, routines, partnerships, and governance mechanisms. Third, sustainability and familiness reinforce one another: familiness provides moral depth to sustainability, while sustainability modernizes familiness by embedding it within contemporary norms of transparency, accountability, and long-term societal responsibility. By integrating corporate branding, sustainability communication, and family business identity literature, this study contributes a comprehensive understanding of how family firms navigate the intersection of heritage, responsibility, and institutional legitimacy.

7 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides an in-depth interpretive analysis of how large German private family firms integrate sustainability into their corporate brand identities, several limitations delineate the scope of its conclusions. The exclusive reliance on corporate websites as empirical material means that the study captures communicated identity constructions rather than the identities experienced by internal and external stakeholders. As curated communication channels, websites privilege strategic self-presentation and do not allow for assessing alignment across actual, communicated, conceived, ideal, and desired identity types (Balmer & Greyser, 2002). Consequently, the study cannot evaluate potential dissonances or gaps between sustainability commitments and organizational practices, such as symbolic or decoupled sustainability (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990).

The interpretivist and discourse-oriented methodology provides conceptual depth but does not enable causal inference or evaluation of the substantive effectiveness of sustainability practices. The researcher's theoretical positioning shapes interpretive findings, and alternative perspectives may yield complementary insights. The study's sampling context also poses limitations. The firms examined are among the largest family-controlled companies in Germany and thus possess substantial managerial, communicative, and financial resources. Research suggests that variation in family ownership influences how family firms communicate family identity in their branding (Barroso Martínez et al., 2019). Furthermore, several of the sampled firms operate within multi-brand or group-level structures, complicating the delineation of unified expressions of sustainability and familiness identities.

The cross-sectional design also limits the ability to capture temporal dynamics. Sustainability communication and identity work evolve as firms undergo generational shifts, respond to regulatory pressures, or adjust to institutional change (Chreim, 2005; Micelotta & Raynard, 2011). The ideal types developed in this study, therefore, represent analytically coherent brand identity models rather than developmental trajectories. Additionally, the absence of stakeholder perspectives restricts insight into how various audiences interpret sustainability–familiness claims and whether these claims influence legitimacy, trust, or identification (Dutton et al., 1994; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Finally, the German institutional context, with its norms of continuity, responsibility, and transparency, may limit the transferability of the findings to other cultural or regulatory environments.

These limitations offer several promising avenues for future research. Studies combining textual analysis with interviews, ethnographic methods, or internal documents would allow researchers to examine identity alignment across internal practices, communicated identity, and stakeholder perceptions. Longitudinal research could explore how the integration of sustainability and familiness evolves, particularly in the context of generational transitions or regulatory changes. Multi-channel communication analyses, including social media, sustainability reports, public communications, employer branding, and stakeholder dialogues, could illuminate whether identity coherence is maintained across platforms. Comparative research involving smaller family firms or those operating in different cultural and institutional settings could test the applicability of the ideal types identified here. Finally, future studies that incorporate stakeholder interpretations would deepen understanding of how these brand identity models influence legitimacy, credibility, reputation, and trust within increasingly complex sustainability regimes.

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