

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Sustainable transitions in the surfing sector. The role of risk and branding

Gregory Borne 

Plymouth Marjon University, Plymouth, UK

## Correspondence

Gregory Borne, Rm W311, Plymouth Marjon University, Derriford Road, Plymouth PL6 8BH, UK.

Email: [greg.borne@falmouth.ac.uk](mailto:greg.borne@falmouth.ac.uk)

## Abstract

This paper explores a theoretical and empirical discussion of the ability of business form a particular sector to transition towards sustainability. The paper contextualises the discussion within the theoretical framework of a 'Risk Society' as outlined by Ulrich Beck. In particular, the paper highlights the relationship between sustainable development, and what Beck describes as the emergence of an emancipatory catastrophism. This theoretical framework is then applied to a novel approach for exploring sustainability through the process of branding ultimately highlighting an industry's receptiveness to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Uniquely, this paper challenges and expands on the narrative of branding as a discursive process that moves beyond a narrow marketing framework. Using a mixed methods approach of in-depth observation, interviews and surveys, the paper focuses on a case study of the largest lifestyle retailer in the surf skate and snow sector. The empirical research is applied both within the case study company itself and over 300 brands in the surf skate and snow sector. Results point to a receptiveness to embedding the sustainable development goals in business models whilst highlighting the challenges that exist from both a business operation and resourcing perspective through to external factors. Furthermore, results highlight the disparity between internal business processes and the process branding. A typology is presented that highlights the relationship between business, the sustainable development goals and theoretical debates.

## KEYWORDS

branding, business, innovation, surfing, sustainable development

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

How we understand the solutions for sustainable development has altered dramatically in the past decade. Since the inception of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, there has been a shift in emphasis towards the role of business in achieving a transition towards a sustainable development. With that in mind, there is still divergence, contradiction and uncertainty as to how this will be achieved. This paper will achieve a number of goals. Theoretically, the

paper addresses the validity of the emergence and role of the idea of an emancipatory catastrophism. as a response to sustainability related risks such as climate change and plastic pollution. Using this framework, the paper discusses the receptiveness of business in a specify industry, to embedding the SDGs within their operations. Practically, the paper explores drivers and barriers for achieving sustainability within the context of the surfing industry and opportunities for the future. Moreover, the paper synthesises debated on sustainability within business and the way of branding for value creation and broader societal benefit.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2023 The Authors. Business Strategy and Development published by ERP Environment and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.



The focus of this paper is the role of large purchaser organisations to influence suppliers and downstream organisations. As such, the paper will proceed in the following way. Initially, this paper will outline the broad theoretical perspective detailing Ulrich Becks notion of an emancipatory catastrophism. This is followed by exploring the shifting emphasis towards business in achieving the SDGs. The nature of branding is then explored and related to sustainability debates drawing essential connections to the role of sustainability within business and the value of branding.

The case study organisation is then discussed, its context within the surfing industry, its structure, strategic vision and sustainability operating model. Initial qualitative research is introduced at this stage to contextualise subsequent discussions. The methods used in this research are then discussed with a focus on the constructed survey that is grounded in broader research relating to surfing and sustainability. The survey results are introduced which progressively build a picture of the relationship between business, sustainability, and branding. The discussions explore the results applying them to the SDGs and emancipatory catastrophism. A typology of the relationship between the elements of this research is discussed and future research directions examined.

## 2 | RISK SOCIETY, REFLEXIVE MODERNITY AND EMANCIPATORY CATASTROPHISM

It is argued that the rise of sustainable development on the global stage is a result of the changing nature of risk (Borne, 2010). Ulrich Beck, who has evolved an understanding of risk through a number of key works. Risk Society (Beck, 1992), Global Risk Society (Beck, 1999) and finally The Metamorphosis of the World (2016). Beck argues that an older industrial society, whose basic principle was the distribution of goods, is being replaced by an emergent risk society, structured around the distribution of hazards. Within this analysis, Beck distinguishes between three epochs of modernity. These are pre-modernity, industrial or first modernity, and finally, second, late or reflexive modernity. Broadly, the concept of modernity has been used to describe a set of social relations and processes that typify global societies. These include science, the nation state, religion, the family. During this time, humanity's relationship with nature is defined through domination and separation. Exponential population growth and urbanisation alter the social networks and conventional social ties within society. Politics in the modern era is defined by the nation state and a unitary political analysis where policy is created to facilitate increasing access to, and control of the world's resources. Moreover, there is increasing success of a capitalist market system which is a driving force of political philosophy in the modern age (Borne, 2010).

The idea of a reflexive modernity throws the aforementioned central tenants of the industrial process into disarray. Science and technology no hold a hegemonic position of knowledge formation, the relationship between established science and unconventional knowledge has become blurred, and the infiltration of the political into

the scientific process disrupts the boundaries between expert and pay knowledge (Borne, 2010).

Ulrich Becks final work, metamorphosis represents an extension of the risk society thesis and centres around the idea of emancipatory catastrophism. Emancipatory catastrophism can be articulated as the unintended yet positive side effects of 'bads'. Emancipatory catastrophism views climate risk as an opportunity to change our 'mode of being in the world', and demands that efforts to minimise negative effects of climate change are taken in the present. The theory of metamorphosis suggests that... 'the literature relating to climate change has become a supermarket for apocalyptic scenarios. Instead the focus should be on what is now emerging – future structures, norms and new beginnings' (Beck, 2016:39).

These theoretical observations provide a backdrop for exploring the role of sustainable development within business. Importantly, this provides important insights into the salience of the SDGs and the mechanisms through which a broader sustainability in business can be achieved.

### 2.1 | Addressing sustainable development in business

Whilst many definitions of sustainable development exist, it is the often quoted World commission on Sustainable Development definition that has endured. 'Development that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet there own needs' (WCED 1987:8). With the tin mind the concept remains highly contested. This in turn means that developing policies and solutions based on the concept remain challenging. A key advantage of the concept is that it is capable of drawing disparate group, sectors and organisations together. And whilst specific definitions and priorities vary, the ability of the concept to forge collaboration is a key strength, and this is particular pertinent since the inception of the SDGs.

What has been recognised, is that there has been a marked shift in the emphasis towards business as key stakeholders in achieving sustainable development. Ferns and Amaeshi (2017) explore the role of business in achieving sustainable development through a discourse analysis of the United Nations Earth Summits. They indicate how the role of business moves from being largely undefined in 1992 to being considered a partner in 2002 to becoming a driver for change in 2012. The authors argue that this is a result of the rearranging of field boundaries and the formation of discourse coalitions. This resonates with earlier observations within the context of the United Nations where there is a constant and shifting dynamic of discourse coalitions of governance and partnerships. It is the willingness to incorporate other actors into governance structures which presents the opening up of the governance process and shift from a balance of power from centralised nation states to a broader governance dynamic. This opening up of this governance dynamic that has facilitated the changing role of business in sustainable development discourses. The trajectory of the increased inclusion of business within sustainable development, identified by Ferns and Amaeshi (2017) continues with the SDGs. In

2015, the United Nations introduced 17 SDGs that replaced the Millennium Development Goals. The goals represent an escalation of the concept of sustainable development on the global stage and subsequently the integration of these goals in national and regional frameworks. This process also runs in parallel with the drive for multiple organisations in different sectors to create innovative ways of realising the goals and addressing their associated targets.

Ferns and Amaeshi (2017) recognise that despite the draw of a unified meaning-making process between once antagonistic actors, Business-SD relations are underpinned by politicised interaction where certain actors can dominate and in so doing marginalise others.

The emphasis on business to provide solutions demands a deeper and more realistic understanding of business visions and practices towards sustainable development. The discourse of business and sustainability presents us with terms such as corporate social responsibility, social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, green business, responsible business, sustainable business and many more. It is a shift in emphasis that sees the blurring of the boundaries between the public, private and third sectors that ultimately which requires a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of these relationships. These insights engage with a broader discussion on the nature of governance and the impacts of these undefined, non-statutory and asymmetrical relationships. Moreover, there are implicit concerns with an emphasis on business solutions to sustainability that centre on notions of accountability, transparency and asymmetric the power dynamics that is involved in partnership relationships with other sectors.

With the above context in mind we can now draw direct connections between achieving sustainable development from a business perspective and the mechanism for achieving this transition often loosely described as sustainable innovation. But what sustainable innovations actually entail from within the business world is difficult to ascertain. As Boons and Ludeke-Freund point out 'the literature on sustainable innovation is hampered by a lack of consensus' (Boons & Lüdeke-Freund, 2013:11). With this lack of consensus in mind this paper aims to empirically explore how innovative practices in business are understood and how receptive a specific sector is to sustainable innovations. Identifying business innovation poses difficulties without in-depth explanations of the practice of each business. However, what is argued here is that by exploring the projection of a business's sustainability credentials through its self-reported and carefully crafted brand message, a link can be established to the role of sustainable innovations in transition to sustainability. The first step in exploring this proposition is an exploration of the notion of what constitutes a 'brand' and the process of branding itself.

## 2.2 | Dimensions of branding

It is difficult to explore any aspect of business, or broader organisational identity unpacking the notion of brands and branding. Brands as both as physical entities (business) and branding as a conceptual frame and a hegemonic perspective on how best to create and project value. The role of branding in business and its impact on the world more

generally has begun to coalesce a body of literature around this central theme. For example, marketing and management scholarship focuses on the positive reinforcement of branding as an activity of any given business. From a sociological perspective branding can be seen as creating symbols and ritualistic behaviour within consumers. Warren and Gibson (2017) synthesise economic geography and a sociological approach to explore the disconnect with surf branding and the consumer identifying surfers as subcultural gatekeepers. The authors argue that in '... the extant literature on the commodification of surfing subculture, little acknowledgment is given to how subcultural values become incompatible with and indeed destructive of corporate growth models' (Warren & Gibson, 2017:180). The authors continue to explore the rise and fall of the big three surfing brands and the role that subcultural identity's play in this story. 'With values pertaining to surfing replaced with imperatives of market share and growth the corporatized multinational brands lost meaningful connections to subcultural origins' (Warren & Gibson, 2017:184).

At the heart of this emergent research programme are questions about how brands and their connected geographic and social relations create meanings and value that is circulated and scaled through the work of various actors, designers, makers, marketers, retailers, and end consumers (Warren & Gibson, 2017:179). These are valuable insights into the relationship between subculture and corporate identity through branding and especially so in this context as Surfdom being previously owned by Quiksilver, one of the big three surfing brands.

## 2.3 | The value of branding

A logical extension of this analysis in the context of sustainability is the relationship between notions of value and how this relates to branding. Bertilsson and Rennstam (2018) point out 'the underlying assumption is that branding is an organisational practice that creates value' (Borne & Ponting, 2017:2). This debate can be positioned within discussions on the reorientation of economic accounting and is synonymous with terms such as environmental economics, ecological economics, sustainability economics, the circular economy and surfnomics (Costanza et al., 2017; Nelson, 2015; Orams, 2017; Scorse & Hodges, 2017; Soderbaum, 2012). But the actual practice and projection of branding itself is often omitted from this analysis. The following will draw connections between these debates on surfing and sustainability forming an important context for subsequent discussions on the role that brands play within the surfing world. To this end, this paper will explore a critical approach to branding and value as put forward by Bertilsson and Rennstam (2018). These authors initially expand the notion of value. This is very much in line with the debates surrounding a re-examination of value for achieving a sustainable development. From this perspective, the authors suggest that branding actually destroys value creating a positive and partitioned image of a business.

'Differently put, if only one, positively laden story is told, it makes sense to assume that something is obscured, such as environmental harm, bad working conditions, and negative consumption patterns.



Even if marketing management scholarship has called for interrogation into whether 'brands create value, provide value, or reduce value for customers' (Keller & Lehmann, 2006:750), little has been done to theorize the value-destructive side of branding, and a broadened understanding of value is needed to accomplish such a quest' (Bertilsson & Rennstam, 2018:2).

Value within branding is almost entirely focused in narrow market terms and in line with sustainability related research in many areas Bertilsson and Rennstam recognise that value is a political and cultural construct. Furthermore, the authors draw on the notion of 'regimes' and worlds that construct the notion of values. But with that in mind the authors argue that actually it is not the notion of value itself that needs to be expanded but instead the understanding of what branding is and what brands do beyond notions of essence and platform.

So far this paper has established the conceptual framework for the research conducted. There has been an exploration of the role of business in achieving sustainability which has been contextualised within the discussion on the SDGs. There has also been a discussion on the notion of branding and brandings relationship to value. By synthesising the discussions on sustainability and branding an enhanced perspective on business and sustainability is achieved that provides a lens through which the empirical work can be discussed. The previous section also focused on the surfing industry as a specific area for empirical research. The following section will develop this discussion by introducing the specific case study.

### 3 | SURFING

With an estimated world surfing population of 50 million (Manero, 2023), the surfing industry is a multibillion dollar constellation of businesses at different stages of the supply chain from the production and manufacturing of both hard and soft goods through to the distribution, consumption, disposal and recycling of these goods. There is no definitive value of the worth of the industry and the methodology for calculations vary but the Surf Industry Manufacturing Association (SIMA) estimates the industry is worth US\$5 billion (SIMA, 2023). Increasingly, scholarship has explored the relationship between surfing as a nature based activity, and sustainable development (Borne, 2018; Borne & Ponting, 2017). This paper takes these debates forward by exploring a case study organisation that is prominent within the surfing industry.

### 4 | SURFDOME

Surfdome is the largest distributor of surf skate and snow products in the world. It currently purchases products from over 300 affiliated brands globally. For some of these brands Surfdome is the most significant and sometimes the only customer and as such has the potential to influence the way that its affiliated businesses operate. Moreover, Surfdome has made significant sustainability gains particularly in respect to reducing and recycling plastic waste.

This has resulted in national media attention as well as Surfdome being highlighted as a case study for good practice in the World Business Council for Sustainable Development report *The Business Case for Reducing Ocean Waste* (WBCSD, 2017). The report highlights how Surfdome has gone from very little recognition to now being one of the top 14 companies tackling ocean waste. 'The retailer's sustainability efforts generated a highly positive impact in terms of public relations as well, and saw 2/3 of its social media traffic generated from its sustainability strategy – a demonstrable competitive advantage' (WBCSD, 2017:18). There is then a clear and steep trajectory in Surfdomes ability to not only embed sustainability within its own operations but also create the visibility of these changes that acts as a business exemplar. The following discussion will explore some of the factors that have contributed to this success.

#### 4.1 | Surfdome origin story

Surfdome was part of the extended network of companies owned by Quiksilver, a company that has contributed to the projection of surfing culture over the past three decades (Stranger 2011). In 2014, Surfdome was sold to the Australian Surfstitch Group, in 2017, the company was bought by the Internet Fusion Group and in 2023 was procured by online retailer BrandAlley. There are then multiple interconnections that range from the altered landscape of the surfing industry, the projection of surfing culture mediated through big business and lifestyle aspirations, to a transitional process that quietly emerges from the decline of an industry giant opening up an unexpected space for a potential sustainability transition.

There are a number of factors that have helped facilitate this transition goal. First, there is an overarching narrative of sustainability with Surfdome actively seeking to embed sustainability in its strategic and operational structure. Second, Surfdomes ambition to act as a catalyst to embed sustainability in multiple brands throughout the surfing industry which provided opportunities to explore an active sustainability transition process. And third, the increasing visibility of the ocean plastics phenomena which has emerged as a dominant, environment, and economic policy imperative. This is a response to increasing scientific evidence of the scale of the plastic crisis with Jang et al. (2015) indicating that five Trillion pieces of plastic or between 86 and a 100 million tonnes of plastic debris are now evident in the world's oceans. Together these factors combine within an organisation capable of exerting significant transitional pressure on the broader surfing industry.

Surfdome is embedding sustainability into its operations in a number of ways. First, within its own operations. Since 2015, the company has removed 14 tonnes of plastic from its packaging on an annual basis. A total of 9.72 tonnes of plastic removed from its operations by transferring to 100% recycled cardboard boxes for all of its outbound products. A total of 2.15 tonnes have been eliminated by changing to recycled paper to fill the voids in the boxes, 0.39 tonnes by switching to reusable ink toner and 1.22 tonnes removed by switching to gum tape. As Adam Hall, Surfdomes Sustainability director points out:

We've basically ring fenced our green activities and then reinvest it into the company. some of the major wins reusing ink cartridges – that saved us a whacking 20 grand and I said I want to keep that and I don't want that to just disappear into the rest of the company – so ive reinvested that into the value of the boxes which costs more than Polly – which is stupidly cheap – and actually eliminating 20 tonnes cost us £900.

These initial savings have now been extended with significant changes being made to the company's holding ware house.

Surfdome in 2018 is diving deeper than ever into sustainability, the new warehouse due to be operational in March of the year is a BREAM rating of 'very good' this is achieved through a wide range of sustainability credentials that include onsite Solar electricity generation, solar heat generation, high efficiency heat recover system, LED lighting all on sensors and grey water systems that utilise rainwater amongst many others. The new site will be a zero to landfill operation.

The second way that sustainability is being embedded and expanded is through the establishment of a number of strategic partnerships, Surfdome have formed partnerships at different scales that operate at industry NGO and the grass roots level (Table 1).

For Surfdome, the combination of a commitment to sustainability within the company as well as supporting external organisations is central in the transition towards sustainability and establishing a foundation on which further initiatives can be promoted is a key element of embedding a long lasting change.

In the minds eye of your audience you absolutely have to get it straight away – so that's the broader side of things and it's the way im motivating business at the same time because if just turned around and said we are banishing plastic – they'll just say – how much is that going to cost – so if we begin with a content play – it fans the flames to me and its quite a broad play.

The essential component of creating a lasting change towards sustainability was to identify economic savings and then ring-fence them so that there is a baseline of savings before bigger and more expensive projects are considered. As already highlighted Surfdome has over 300 suppliers that it buys its products from and for some of these brands Surfdome is the only purchaser of their products. This inevitably means that Surfdome is in a very strong position to influence the brands that they purchase products from. Adam describes Surfdome as an airport for its suppliers with every single individual product arriving with them in a Polyurethane bag. Polyurethane offers retailers advantages for the distribution of their products. It is water-proof, strong and it protects the products from dust. Also, it is

**TABLE 1** Strategic partnerships.

Strategic partnerships	Worked with
Surfing England	Surfers Against Sewage
#2minutebeachclean	Ellen Macarthur Foundation
The Plastic Project	World Business Council for Sustainable Development
Sustainable Surf	Save the Waves Coalition
Plymouth Sustainability and Surfing Research Group	Plastic Oceans
Protect our Winters	Surfers not Street Children
Less plastic	
Sustainable Coastlines Hawaii	

transparent which enables those in the warehouse to see inside them, and it also enable the products to be slid along benches which is identified as an important if not unexpected advantage of using this material. These advantages create barriers for phasing out the use of this material. This then is the challenge for the third step in Surfdomes sustainability transition.

We will also work on reducing the plastic impact of our suppliers as well. Currently packaging is sent out in cardboard degradable and recycle packaging. Also this is branded with the 2 minute beach clean.

Adam explained the plan with regard to influencing their suppliers by emphasising the cost effective strategy that he employed.

Its almost a scaled up version of what we've done with the outbound packaging so we are going to turn around to our brands and say look this model does work – so we want to use that model with the brands for the inbound packaging.

Surfdomes ambitions to transition the surfing industry to a more sustainable operating model are based on two fundamental themes. The first is leading by example, and the second is through the exertion of influence as a dominant brand purchaser in the market. In this way Surfdome is a sustainability aggregator in the transition process operating as an overarching body. Despite a visible lack of consensus on what a sustainable supply chain involves (Ahi & Searcy, 2013) the ability of large business to influence different aspects of their supply chain is receiving increased attention in multiple sectors and academic disciplines. As Fahimnia et al. (2015) point out '...sustainable and green supply chain management is necessarily globalized' (2015:112). As such, an approach is required that has the ability to explore the complexity involved from a systems perspective (Moon & Kim, 2005).

Within the surfing industry the detrimental impact relating to product manufacture and distribution have already been explored (Laderman, 2015). Ashby et al. (2013) examine the sustainability dimensions of supply chain management using the surfing brand



Finisterre as an example of a closed loop approach. With the above in mind, there is a significant lack of research that can address the role of a single dominant networked organisation, like Surfdomo, that is capable of catalysing a transitional processes. Within the surfing industry this is predominately because there are few retailers that occupy such a prominent position. Perhaps a closer parallel is present in discussions and analysis that relates to governing bodies and their impact on affiliated members. It is instructive at this point to briefly explore research in field.

Within surfing, Gerke (2017) highlights the role of governing bodies and in this case EuroSIMA, in facilitating broader sustainability practices within the affiliated brands. EuroSIMA is identified as a key intermediary in collective and collaborative projects between firms. Gerke highlights some of the challenges that this collective approach poses. For example, the current cluster governing body model has functioned for more than a decade but is a precarious model since it depends largely on public funding. 'In order to become a sustainable business model companies need to take initiatives themselves to approach larger, costly and risky topics in collaborative approaches' (Gerke, 2017:83). Gerke demonstrates that sustainability is integrated through interfirm collaboration that requires the facilitation of an overarching body.

This then provides a complementary mechanism to that provided by organisations such as EuroSIMA. As Gerke concludes, 'Topics towards sustainability and corporate social responsibility are typically these kinds of general topics that are more easily approached at an industry level than on an individual business level' (Gerke, 2017:83). While not completely synonymous, there are strong parallels with Gerkes' observations and the position within the market that Surfdomo occupies. Arguably however, a dominant business is able to excerpt a higher level of control through the possibility of financial penalties and market marginalisation.

This section has elaborated on the role of Surfdomo. It has introduced the organisation and its relationship to the broader surfing industry. It has explored the internal sustainability model of Surfdomo and has drawn on reflections from the organisations sustainability manager. The discussion also highlighted the pivotal role of partnerships to develop sustainability solutions. Surfdomos strategic position within the surfing industry was then highlighted within the context of clusters where parallels were drawn to the notion of governing bodies which exert influence over their members in a regulatory way. The following discussion will explore the construction of the survey which forms the centre piece of the results for this paper.

## 5 | NARRATIVES AND SURVEYS

The research presented in this paper adopted a mixed methods approach with an overarching ethnographic tradition. This approach has been previously utilised to explore discourses of sustainable development and acknowledges that there is a need to adopt a pragmatic approach to data collection and analysis (Borne, 2013, 2018). Initially conversations and interviews took place with the Surfdomos

sustainability lead, key areas of which have already been discussed. This allowed an in-depth understanding of the companies' operations and aspirations as well as a broader understanding of context and industry dynamics. The initial interviews informed the development of a co constructed survey that identified a number of specific issues that needed to be addressed to explore the receptiveness of the surf industry to sustainability and hence resonance with the SDGs. The survey provides a baseline for understanding where brands engage with sustainability, how they understood the environment and what their priorities are in this area. Also, the survey provided an information base that informed Surfdomo in the development of policies and procedures that would enhance overall sustainability within the sector that were actionable and solutions orientated.

### 5.1 | Aims and expectations

The underlying aims of the survey were to gain a broad sectoral baseline of sustainability understanding and motivations whilst considering the role of branding. This was achieved by drawing on key themes from the aforementioned interviews, as well as drawing on literature that acknowledges the essential role of the branding process, not only for projecting business value to consumers but also potentially for marginalising destructive business operations. The survey was also informed by the role of a number of social, economic and environmental risks that are associated with sustainability. This format allowed the research to directly address business perceptions of risk and sustainability, operational integration of sustainability principles and the participating businesses understanding of branding as a mechanism for projecting value. These elements also allow for an assessment of the overarching theoretical proposition that the risks associated with climate change create a late modern space for emancipatory catastrophism.

Practically, Surfdomos affiliated brands were made aware of the survey prior to it being despatched and the profile of the survey was raised though a press release via Surfdomo to raise the awareness of the research more generally. A number of surf specific publications ran the story such as Boardsport Source (2017) as well as more general organisational exposure, for example Climate Action (2017) which works in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme. The survey was despatched individually via email to over 384 brands on the 8 November 2017. The cut-off date for the survey was 15 December 2017 and we were expecting a significant response rate from the brands involved. Overall, 46 brands responded which was 12% of the overall group. Initial questions focused on the nature of the respondents business which included whether they were surf, skate, or snow, number of employees and the operational scale. The majority of the respondents at 95% were location in Europe, 53% were located in North America. This was followed by 40% in Asia, 35.56% in Australasia. Thirty-one percent in South America and 20% in Africa.

The distribution networks for Surfdomos associated brands operate at different levels and it was initially important to ascertain the

level at which the brands operated. Figure 1 identifies these operating scales. Predominantly at 56% of brands that participated in the study were operating at the global headquarters level. This was followed by regional multi-brand distributor at 28.89%, regional brand at 18% and local single brand and local multibrand distributors both at 2%.

## 5.2 | Business and sustainability

A series of questions directly addressed the brands understanding of and engagement with sustainability as a concept. Initially brands were asked if they were concerned about sustainability related issues. Over 95% indicated that they were. Perhaps a little surprisingly 2% indicated that they were not concerned with sustainability issues. Expanding on perceptions of sustainability respondents were asked to indicate whether they thought sustainability was more focused on environmental, social or economic issues. Over 63% indicated that

they believed sustainability all three areas. This was followed in priority by environment, society and economy, respectively. with an emphasis on the environment followed by society and then the economy. The survey then moved on to explore if brands implement any form of sustainability-related strategies.

Brands were presented with a number of issues that fall under the umbrella term of 'sustainability operations' as shown in Figure 2. This included, labour conditions, corporate social responsibility, environmental management plans, fair trade and CO<sub>2</sub> reporting. Respondents were also asked to indicate if they had initiated or had plans to initiate their own sustainability initiatives.

Most of the brands at 89% indicated that they monitored the labour conditions of their suppliers. This was followed with 60% indicating that they had a corporate social responsibility plan. Fifty per cent responded that they had an environmental management plan and interestingly 41% said that they had their own innovations in relation to sustainability. Thirty-one per cent responded that they were

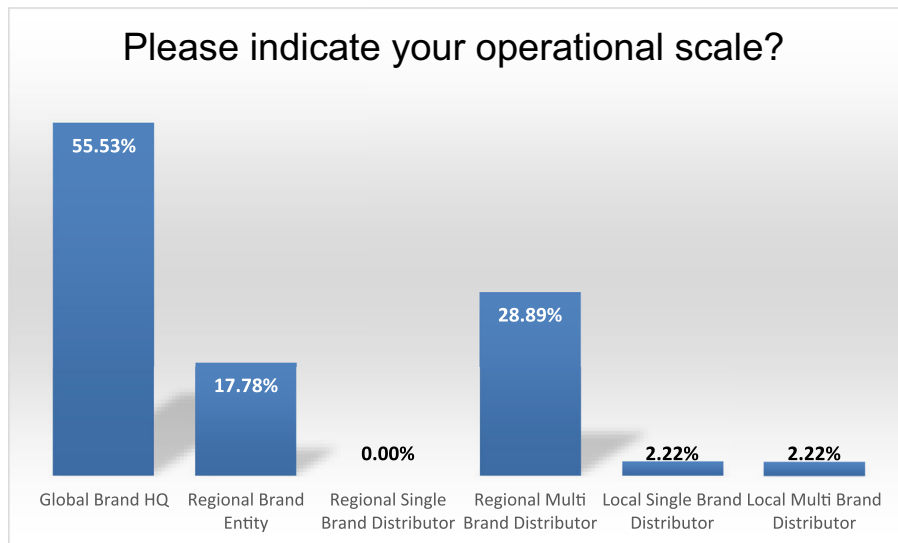


FIGURE 1 Scale of operations.

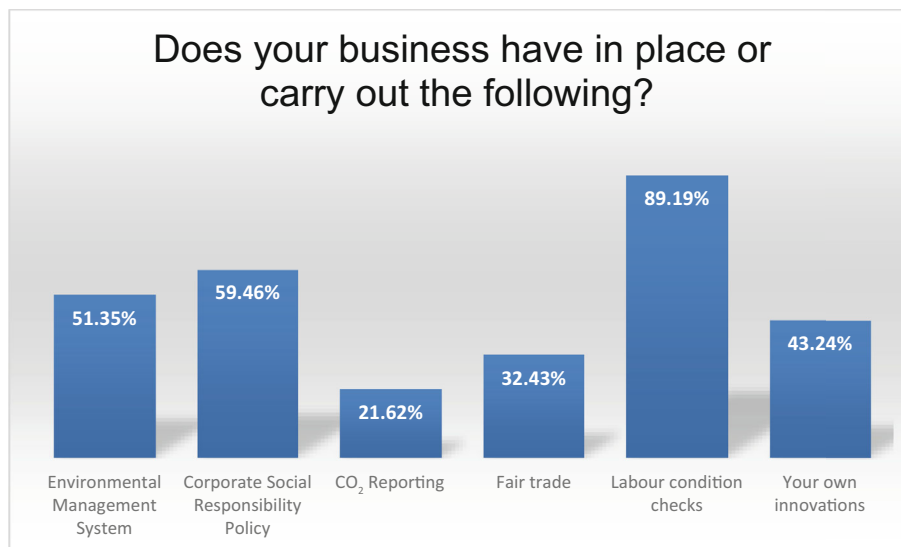
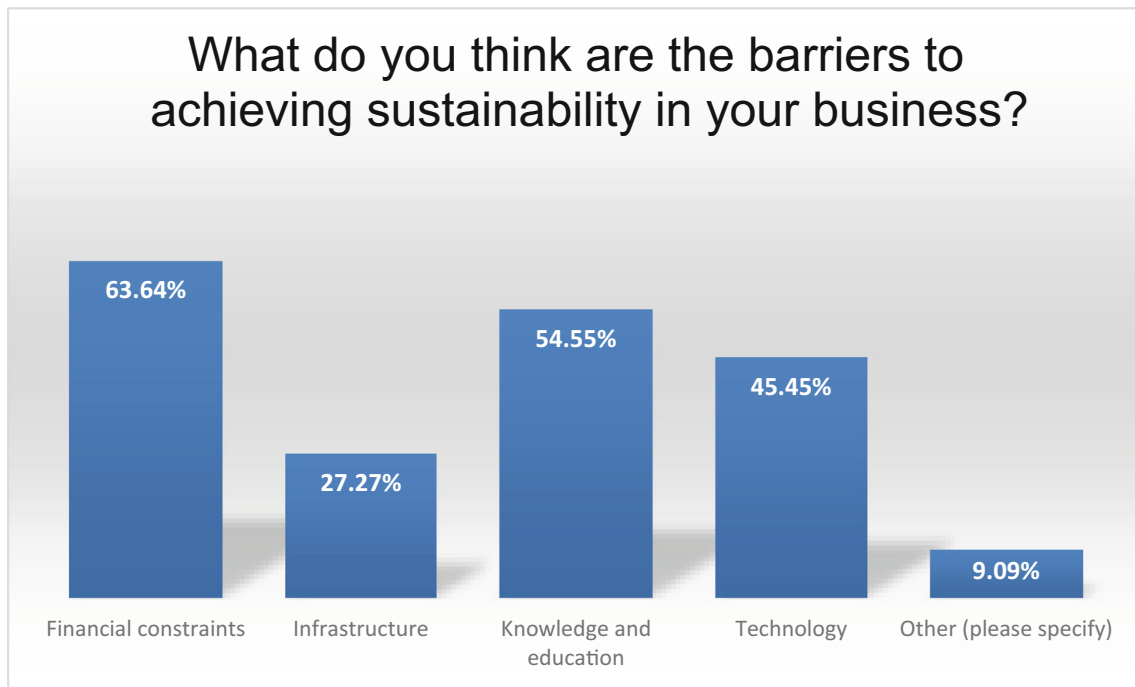
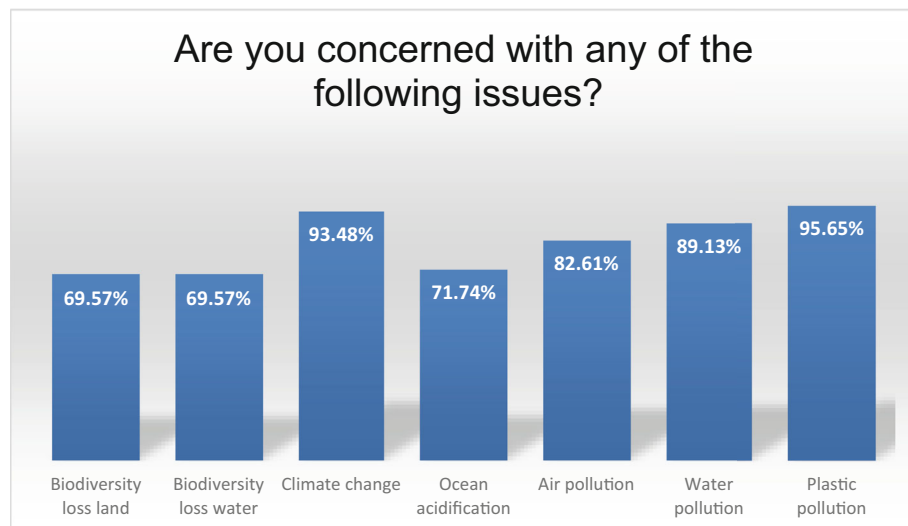


FIGURE 2 Sustainable operations.



**FIGURE 3** Barriers to sustainability.

**FIGURE 4** Risk concern.



involved with fair trade-related initiatives. Finally, 22% said that they reported on CO<sub>2</sub>.

Establishing a broad baseline of questions that related to existing sustainability mechanisms the following question sought to explore what brands felt were barriers to achieving sustainability in business and a number of options were provided. As identified in Figure 3 most brands at 64% indicated that they felt that financial considerations were the main barriers to achieving sustainability within their businesses. This was followed by a lack of knowledge and education at 54% and this in turn was followed by technological barriers. Finally, 27% of brands felt that infrastructure was a barrier to achieving sustainability in business. Nine percent indicated that there were other

barriers and these included. In a separate question, 98% of brands indicated that if economically viable they would implement sustainability initiatives.

### 5.3 | Risk concern and policies

The salience, understanding and response to risk enables the research to directly connect with the propositions outlined above that risk is a key driver to change within a risk society. Moreover, identifying responses to a number of risks provides an opportunity to explore that relevance of the role of emancipatory catastrophism in catalysing



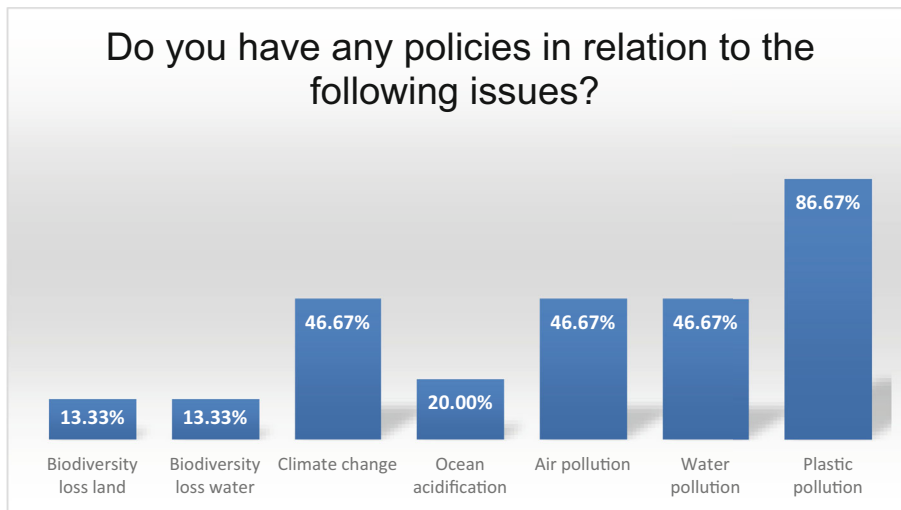


FIGURE 5 Brand policies.

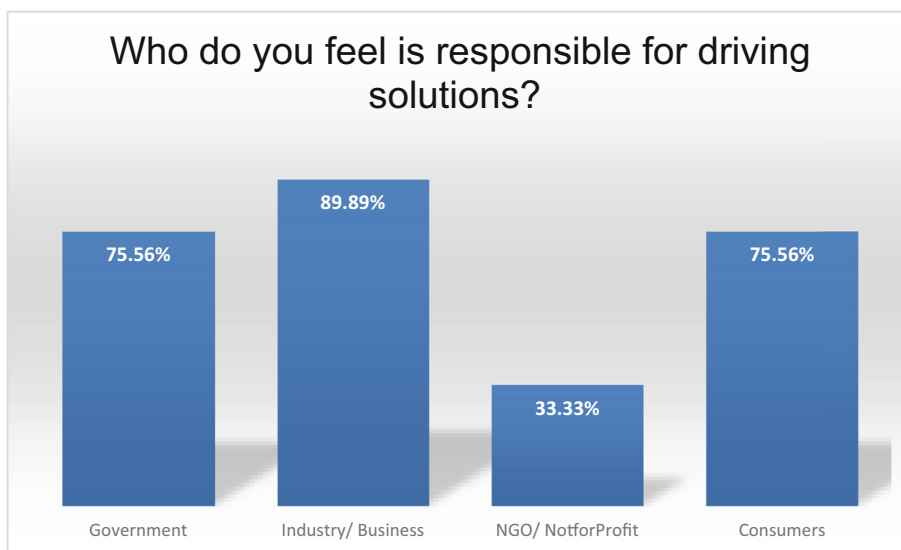


FIGURE 6 Responsible for solutions.

transitions towards sustainability. Therefore respondents were asked to indicate their concern for a number of risks associated with sustainability.

As is evident in Figure 4, 70% of respondents indicated that they were concerned with all of the issues highlighted. Of the individual issues plastic pollution was of most concern at 96% which was followed by climate change at 93%. Water pollution received a response rate of 90% followed by air pollution at 83%, ocean acidification at 72%. Water and land biodiversity loss both received responses of 70%. Respondents were asked to prioritise these same issues. Climate change was seen as the issue of most concern to the brands. This was followed by water pollution in fifth place. Air pollution and plastic pollution were jointly in third place. Ocean acidification and biodiversity loss on land and water were jointly of concern behind the other issues presented.

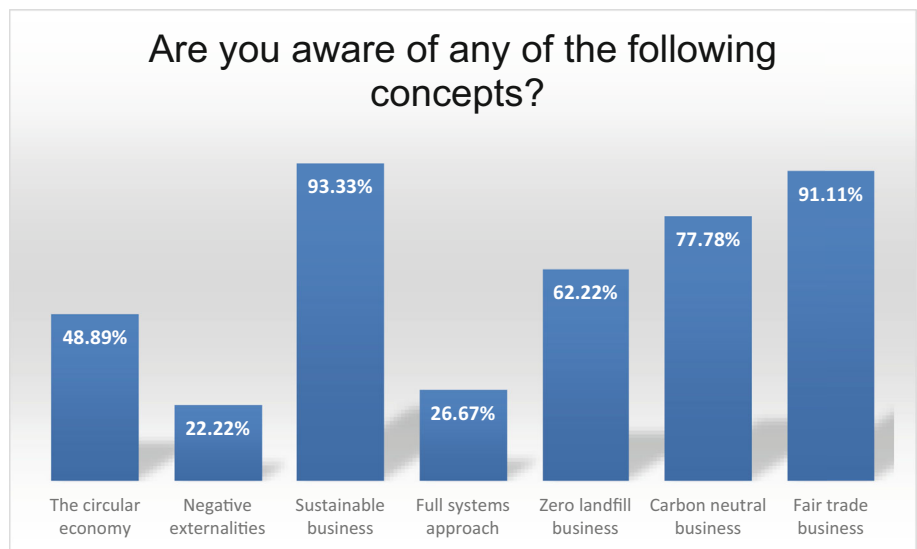
Highlighting the same set of issues a final question in this section asked respondents is they have any policies in place that related to the issues. Figure 5 shows that the majority of respondents

at 87% indicated that policies were in place for plastic pollution. Water and air pollution and climate change all scored equally at 47%. This was followed by ocean acidification at 20% and then ocean and land biodiversity loss at 13%.

#### 5.4 | Responsibility and solutions

Responsibility assignment for sustainability-related issues has been identified as a significant indicator of engagement and subsequent action towards sustainability. Figure 6 illustrates responses to the question, who do you feel is responsible for driving solutions? Overwhelmingly, brands identified industry and business at 90% as being responsible for driving solutions, this is followed by the government at 76% and consumers at 75%. Twenty-nine percent said NGOs and not for profits were responsible for driving solutions. Not for profit organisations and NGOs receiving the least responses is consistent with the broader research relating to the lack of support from industry

FIGURE 7 Business model awareness.



for other surfing-related organisations. The emphasis of the survey questions alters at this point to explore socially related sustainability issues beyond the immediate business. This included suppliers labour conditions the impact on local communities where products are manufactured and produced as well as the efficiency of the businesses supply chain. More than 70% of all respondents indicated that they were concerned about all of these issues. Eighty-six percent indicated that labour conditions were a concern, 80% were concerned with the efficiency of the supply chain and 70% were concerned with the impact on local communities. A subsequent question also asked if brands were aware of the concept of modern day slavery 96% indicated that they were.

Expanding on the previous set of questions a specific question was included that asked respondents to indicate to what extent they were aware of concepts that can be said to apply to new models or modes of doing business. Figure 7 shows that most brands at 93% said that they were aware of the term sustainable business, similarly a significant proportion of respondents at 91% said that they were aware of the term fair trade business. Seventy-eight percent said that they were aware of the term carbon neutral business. Following this over, half of respondents at 62% said that they were aware of the term zero landfill business. Broader concepts such as the circular economy at 49%, full systems approach at 27% and negative externalities at 22% were also highlighted. Overall, there was a higher level of awareness of some of the more established and well publicised terminology which was to be expected. The two concepts that received the least responses, full systems approach and negative externalities where more specialist terms that sit outside the normal economic framework.

## 5.5 | Communicating and motivating

The research highlights some interesting results for a broader understandings of industry responsiveness to embedding sustainability both

at the strategic and operational scale. There is a clear appetite amongst the brands that responded to embed sustainability in their operations. In combination with this, whilst 'environment' is the predominant interpretation of sustainability amongst the brands the connections between society and economy are also visible. Breaking this down into some specific sustainability-related issues the brands also indicated that they were concerned with multiple environmentally related sustainability issues with climate change and plastic pollution of highest concern. When asked to prioritise these same issues climate change was of most concern with plastic pollution being fourth in line after air pollution and water pollution.

The next question using the same set of issues moves past awareness and concern to explore if the brands had any policies in place in relation to these issues. As we have seen plastic pollution scored highly at 87%. This result resonates with the actionability of plastic pollution mitigation measures within a business operations. In line with the broader efforts and success of Surfdome, this element is something that can be monitored and measured with tangible outputs through a reduction in plastic use. Over 45% of brands indicated that they had policies in place for water and air pollution as well as climate change.

As well as the environment sustainability issues a number of relevant social issues were also highlighted. This included labour conditions, the impact on local communities as well as the efficiency of supply chains were all considered important. All of these issues were of concern for most of the brands at over 70% with labour conditions of the suppliers and the efficiency of the supply chain being of greatest concern. As with the environmental issues brands were also asked to indicate if they took any action in relation to social sustainability. This was embodied in a single question that asked if the brands monitored the labour conditions of their suppliers, of which 87% indicated that they did.

Expanding this again to the economic component of sustainability, the survey sought to explore brands understanding of non-conventional business and economic terminology to ascertain an

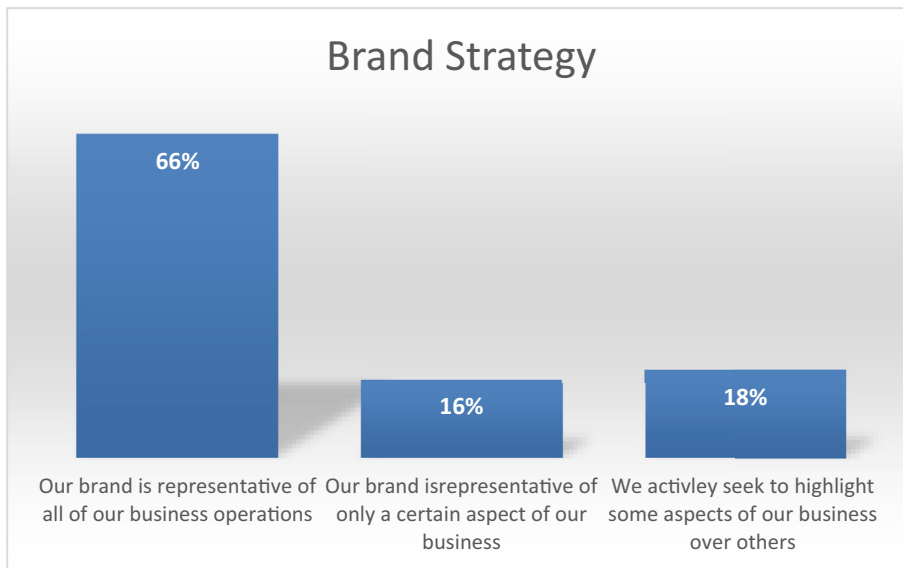


FIGURE 8 Brand strategy.

awareness of alternative ways of doing business. There were a broad range of responses to the issues presented with sustainable business being the most recognisable term, followed by fair trade and carbon neutral business. There was considerably less awareness of more specific economic terms that may be applicable to business operations.

Overall, 94% of brands indicated that if it was economically viable they would include sustainability in their business operations with financial constraints to embedding sustainability seen as the most significant barrier. Knowledge and education was also seen as a significant barrier followed by technology and infrastructure. These results provide an insight on which mechanisms for transitions to sustainability can be evoked both within the brands themselves and externally through broader industry pressures.

Results in the previous section focus on key elements of sustainability for the participating brand. In line with the theoretical and conceptual framework for the paper, the following results explore how the brands understand the process of branding.

## 6 | EXAMINING THE CONCEPT OF THE BRAND

Drawing on the insights from Bertilsson and Rennstam (2018) outlined above, two of the survey questions specifically addressed the activity of branding itself in order to receive an initial insight into businesses understanding of the impact of branding. Respondents were asked if they felt branding was a positive activity for sustainability. The majority of respondents at 52% indicated that branding as a positive activity for sustainability, only 9% said that it was not positive and a large proportion of respondents at 39% said that they did not know. Brands were then presented with these statements relating to the process of branding.

Bertilsson and Rennstam (2018) argue that brands innately believe that branding is a positive activity but that inevitably only a

partial picture of the business can be represented within a brand. With that in mind however Figure 8 shows that 66% of respondents indicated that their brand was representative of all of their business operations. Only 16% said that their brand is representative of only a certain aspect of our business and 18% said that they actively seek to highlight some aspects of our business over others with our brand. This question received the lowest response rate of all the questions in the survey. This may be indicative of an innate belief within the business community that branding is a positive process with very little reflection on what this might actually involve.

## 7 | DISCUSSION

Based on the results and the contextual basis of this paper the following section will explore a number of ways in which the empirical results move the debates forward. The conceptual framework of this paper synthesised two distinct areas into a single framework. This was sustainability, which was contextualised by the SDGs, and branding. This proved to be both constructive and informative for the research structure and enabled the results to be articulated in a way that reinforces both domains.

### 7.1 | Sustainability and the value of branding

Warren and Gibson (2017) identified a disconnect between the values of surfing and the corporatised multinational brands, that ultimately lead to the demise of the core identity of the brands which is detrimental to brand authenticity. This is contextualised within the broader observations that the relationship between the corporate world and the development, evolution and growth of surfing is intimately bound in a symbiotic narrative. Results presented in this paper display a more nuanced relationship between the brand, the process of branding and the embedding of

sustainability within business. This particularly applies to the 'value-destructive' nature of branding (Bertilsson & Rennstam, 2018). As the results indicate, over half the brands felt that the process of branding was a positive process for achieving sustainability.

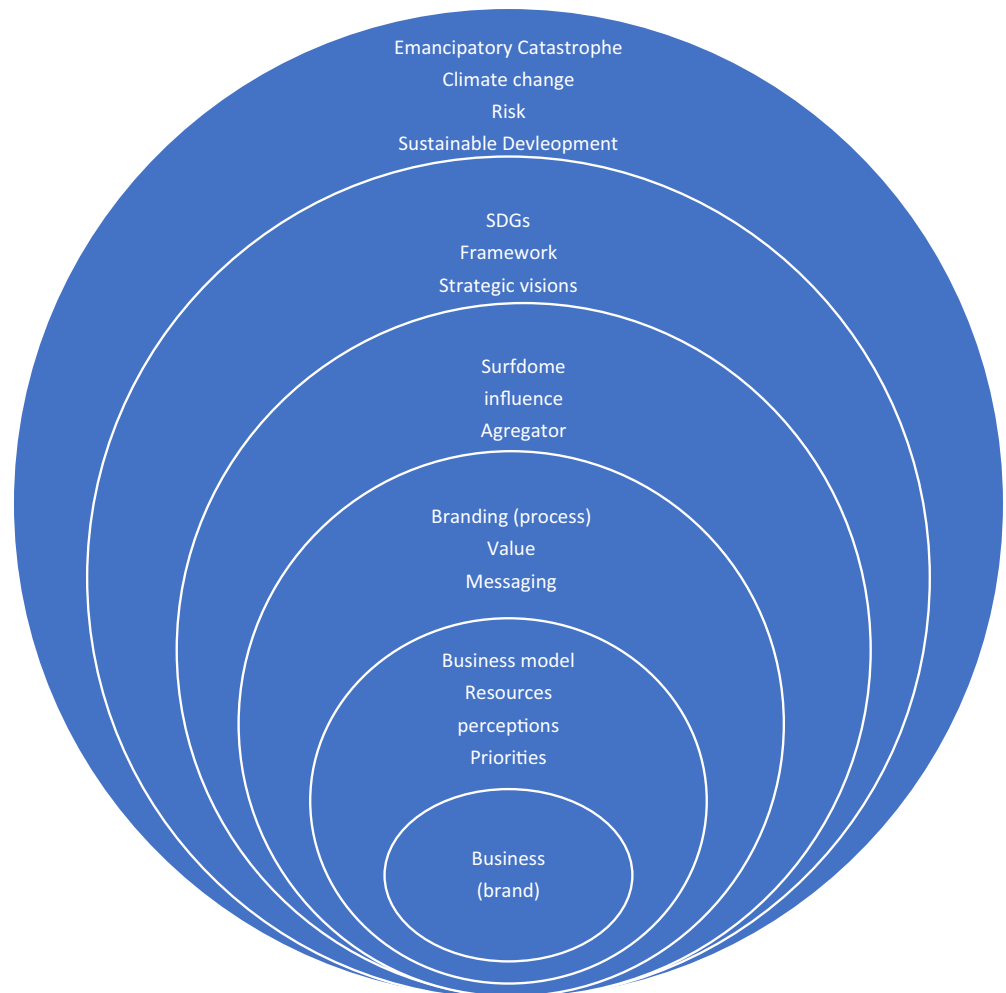
However, over 30% of respondents indicated that they did not know what impact the process of branding would have and combined with the 9% that did not know, this represents a significant portion that did not respond positively to the relationship between branding and sustainability. Furthermore, when respondents were asked to indicate to what extent their brand message represented their business operations there was a strong positive response to this question. This poses an interesting added dimension to responses that more specifically address sustainability and represent a potential contradiction in the survey results. It is with this in mind that the following explores the implications of the survey results for sustainability and how this may apply more broadly to the SDGs.

Whilst the survey did not explicitly mention the SDGs the results suggest the receptiveness to achieving the goals within a specific business sector. Overwhelmingly, there was a strong 'intention' or desire to engage with sustainability in principle. With that said, a number of barriers to achieving sustainability despite results that point to respondents highlighting business and corporations as most

responsible to provide solutions to sustainability-related issues. This then suggests a space through which the SDGs can be integrated into the strategic and operational frameworks of the brands involved.

The SDGs represent an interrelated framework for repositioning the relationship between society, economy and the environment. The 17 SDGs and the 169 targets associated provide an opportunity for business to respond to broader imperatives that extend beyond a business as usual and profit-centred approach. Research presented here, to a lesser or greater degree is able to address all SDGs. A particular emphasis can be seen in SDG8: Decent work and Economic Growth; SDG 9: Industry Innovation and Infrastructure; SDG12 Responsible consumption and Production, as well as SDG17: Partnership for he Goals.

The businesses discussed would benefit from a stronger engagement with frameworks and mechanisms that that encourage and evaluate the progress towards the goals. For example closer synergies can be established between the goals and United National Global Compact (Rasche, 2020). Also specific mechanisms such as the SDG compass can be adopted to help align business strategies to the goals (sdgcompass 2023). Other research has also explored the specifics of embedding he SDGs within supply chains creating conceptual models for sustainable supply chain management (Zimon et al., 2020).



**FIGURE 9** From theory to practice: a layered approach.

At the operational level of within the surfing world, the research highlights a number of issues. Initially, the relationship between Surf-dome as an influencer and driver for change within the sector as a whole. The results suggest that there is a receptiveness to sustainability guidance from Surf-dome. This is representative of the willingness of brands to engage with the research process as well as results that suggest both an intention to and existing evidence of the integration for sustainability into the brands operations. With that in mind, there are identified barriers to the uptake of sustainability within the sector that could be addressed to increase this engagement. Surf-dome could then build on a 'lead by example' model of embedding sustainability to actively address the multiple context-specific issues that each brand has depending on its product, service and position within the supply chain.

The reality of the ability of Surf-dome to actually be able to integrate these disparate needs into its sustainability strategy would depend on expertise and resourcing and the ability to combine both the perceived educational deficit with a clear understanding of the structural needs of the associated brand occupying different areas of the industry.

Figure 9 represents the layers that have been discussed in this paper. At the core is the business or brand itself, the physical entity that is the business. As the initial elements of the research addresses the second layer relates to business models resources perceptions and priorities in relation to sustainability. Expanding this again, the process of branding then projects the messaging of that business where it is recognised that this process can project value but also simultaneously obscure 'value destructive' activities. In the context of this research, Surf-dome then occupies a position that is able to exert influence on these brands potentially catalysing a transition towards sustainability. In the next layer, the SDGs provide a framework and an overarching strategic vision for enhancing sustainability within the surfing industry.

In the final layer, as was discussed at the outset of this paper an overarching theoretical perspective was provided that centred around notions of a risk society and Ulrich Becks proposition of an emancipatory catastrophism. That is an enabling space facilitating a transition towards sustainability in the face of global risks such as climate change, but can also be expanded to other areas of risk such as plastic pollution. This element completes the overall picture of the research and creates a discourse between theory and practice.

In reality, these layers are nonlinear and interactive. The research points to the need for a closer alignment between the perception and operational realities of brands and the process of projecting the value of the business to consumers through the branding process, it is in this space that we see opportunities for the SDGs to add value to business and society more broadly.

## 7.2 | Future research

The initial in depth interviews and subsequent survey explored a number of pertinent issues in relation to sustainability, risk, branding and

the SDGs. However, inevitably many important issues were not discussed. A qualitative assessment of the brands association with sustainability would be a valuable extension of the research presented here. The association with brand value and sustainability has only provided a snapshot of the relationship between the two and this conceptual framework could be expanded both within and beyond the surfing industry. Also this research could be expanded to explore Surf-domes influence on different areas of the surfing industry. This could include the manufacturers and distributors of hard and soft goods, as well as the varying influence of different sizes of business and geographical location.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how a single company has attempted to create the space for embedding sustainability within its operational framework as well as providing leadership for the broader surfing industry. The paper has explored the strategies for embedding this model and highlighted the tangible benefits that have resulted from it from within the company. There has been a focus on reducing plastic packaging within Surf-dome and plastic pollution has risen to a strong policy position for enabling environmental, societal and economic transition. The presentation of the survey and associated discussion extends the previous analysis in two ways. First, it provides insights into broader industry understanding and receptiveness to sustainability through alternative business models. Second, this paper has extended the representation of transition dynamics through the implementation of the Surf-dome model to challenge some of the normative assumptions made when discussing a 'brand'. This allows for a deeper engagement with the underlying principles of brand formation, projection and the creation of value which underpin sustainability strategies and initiatives. These result and discussion have been applied to the United Nations SDGs as well applying this to broader theoretical debates relating to risk. Ultimately, this paper provides both theoretical and practical insights that are capable of extending beyond the case study area on a cross sector basis.

## FUNDING INFORMATION

There was no funding received for this research.

## ORCID

Gregory Borne  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8227-9679>

## REFERENCES

- Ahi, P., & Searcy, C. (2013). A comparative literature analysis of definitions for green and sustainable supply chain management. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 52, 329–341.
- Ashby, A., Hudson Smith, M., & Shand, R. (2013). From principle to practice embedding sustainability in clothing supply chain strategies. In *Sustainability in fashion and textiles: Values, design, production and consumption*. Greenleaf Publishing.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society, towards a new modernity*. Sage.



- Beck, U. (1999). *Global risk society*. The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization.
- Beck, U. (2016). *The metamorphosis of the world: How climate change is transforming our concept of the world*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Bertilsson, J., & Rennstam, J. (2018). The destructive side of branding: A heuristic model for analyzing the value of branding practice. *Organization*, 25(2), 260–281.
- Boardsportsource. (2017). Plymouth Sustainability And Surfing Research Group X Surfdomo Research Piece. Retrieved December 15, 2017, from <http://www.boardsportsource.com/2017/11/21/plymouth-sustainability-surfing-research-group-pssrg-x-surfdomo-research-piece>
- Boons, F., & Lüdeke-Freund, F. (2013). Business models for sustainable innovation: State-of-the-art and steps towards a research agenda. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 45, 9–19.
- Borne, G. (2010). *A framework for sustainable global development and the effective governance of risk governance of risk*. Edwin Mellen Press.
- Borne, G. (2013). Exploring discourses of sustainable development: A flexible framework. *Methodological Innovations Online*, 8(2), 90–106.
- Borne, G., & Ponting, J. (2017). *Sustainable surfing*. Routledge.
- Borne, G. (2018). *Surfing and sustainability*. Routledge.
- Climate Action. (2017). New partnership to study how boardsports address sustainability. <http://www.climateactionprogramme.org/news/new-partnership-to-study-how-boardsports-address-sustainability>
- Costanza, R., De Groot, R., Braat, L., Kubiszewski, I., Fioramonti, L., Sutton, P., & Grasso, M. (2017). Twenty years of ecosystem services: How far have we come and how far do we still need to go? *Ecosystem Services*, 28, 1–16.
- Fahimnia, B., Sarkis, J., & Davarzani, H. (2015). Green supply chain management: A review and bibliometric analysis. *International Journal of Production Economics*, 162, 101–114.
- Ferns, G., & Amaeshi, K. (2017). Struggles at the summits: Discourse coalitions, field boundaries, and the shifting role of business in sustainable development. *Business & Society*, 58, 0007650317701884.
- Gerke, A. (2017). Towards more sustainable business practices in surf industry clusters. In G. Borne & J. Ponting (Eds.), *Sustainable surfing*. Sustainable Surfing.
- Jang, Y. C., Lee, J., Hong, S., Choi, H. W., Shim, W. J., & Hong, S. Y. (2015). Estimating the global inflow and stock of plastic marine debris using material flow analysis: A preliminary approach. *Journal of the Korean Society for Marine Environment and Energy*, 18(4), 263–273.
- Keller, K. L., & Lehmann, D. R. (2006). Brands and branding: Research findings and future priorities. *Marketing Science*, 25(6), 740–759.
- Laderman, S. (2015). Beyond green: Sustainability, freedom and labour of the surf industry. In G. Borne & J. Ponting (Eds.), *Sustainable stoke: Transitions to sustainability in the surfing world*, Plymouth. University of Plymouth Press.
- Manero, A. (2023). A case for protecting the value of 'surfing ecosystems'. *NPJ Ocean Sustainability*, 2, 6. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44183-023-00014-w>
- Moon, S. A., & Kim, D. J. (2005). Systems thinking ability for supply chain management. *Supply Chain Management*, 10(5), 394–401.
- Nelson, C. (2015). Surfonomics: Using economic valuation to protect surfing. In G. Borne & J. Ponting (Eds.), *Sustainable stoke: Transitions to sustainability in the surfing world*. Plymouth University Press.
- Orams, M. (2017). Spot X: Surfing remote destinations and sustaining wilderness surfing experiences. In G. Borne & J. Ponting (Eds.), *Sustainable surfing*. London Routledge.
- Rasche, A. (2020). The United Nations global compact and the sustainable development goals. In *Research handbook of responsible management* (pp. 228–241). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Scorse, J., & Hodges, T. (2017). The non-market value of surfing and its body policy implications. In G. Borne & J. Ponting (Eds.), *Sustainable surfing* (pp. 137–143). Routledge.
- Soderbaum, P. (2012). *Understanding sustainability economics: Towards pluralism in economics*. Routledge.
- Stranger, M. (2011). *Surfing life: Surface, substructure and the commodification of the sublime*. Routledge.
- Surf Industry Members Association. (2023). *Surfonomics*. <https://surfindustry.org/pages/surfonomics>
- Warren, A., & Gibson, C. (2017). Subcultural enterprises, brand value, and limits to financialized growth: The rise and fall of corporate surfing brands. *Geoforum*, 86, 177–187.
- World Business Council for Sustainable Development. (2017). The business case for reducing ocean plastic. [www.wbcsd.org/content/wbcsd/download/3380/44205](http://www.wbcsd.org/content/wbcsd/download/3380/44205)
- Zimon, D., Tyan, J., & Sroufe, R. (2020). Drivers of sustainable supply chain management: Practices to alignment with un sustainable development goals. *International Journal for Quality Research*, 14(1), 219–236.

**How to cite this article:** Borne, G. (2023). Sustainable transitions in the surfing sector. The role of risk and branding. *Business Strategy & Development*, 6(4), 610–623. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsd2.266>