Brand Circularity as a Manifestation of Conscientious Corporate Brands: Initial Conceptual Thoughts on Developing a Brand Circularity Model

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Abstract:

This paper addresses growing demand from industry, science, and society for credible brand circularity. Many firms already run repair, take-back, and product-as-a-service programs, yet purpose, operations, and communication often remain decoupled. This creates perception gaps and greenwashing risk. The guiding question is how branding can integrate circular-economy principles so that a brand's why, how, and what move in sync and market perceptions reflect actual practice. The paper conceptualizes the Brand Circularity Model, a concise brand-level coherence framework that builds on established sustainability and circular economy pillars. It integrates the Golden Circle with the Cultural Onion and distinguishes three interdependent layers: Envisioned Brand Circularity (purpose and normative commitments), Communicated Brand Circularity (strategic realization and signaling across touchpoints), and Enacted Brand Circularity (tangible and symbolic expressions in offerings aligned with circular economy principles). The model offers a practical path for managers: anchor the why, implement and disclose the how/what, and audit coherence over time. It also outlines directions for future research and a measurement agenda for perceived brand circularity.

Introduction
Sustainability has become increasingly important in branding and corporate strategy. H&M for example describes sustainability as a factor "at the heart" of their business (H&M Group, 2024). Brands face rising, practical demands for credible circularity. Firms already deploy circular economy (CE) practices such as repair, take-back, and product-as-a-service (Apple Inc., 2025, Ikea, n.d., Ram, 2021). Consumers and stakeholders ask for evidence they can understand and trust. Scholarship offers rich pillars to build on: CSR and conscientious brands articulate purpose and co-creation (Carroll, 1991; Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Sustainable marketing and the triple bottom line widen accountability (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017; Norman & MacDonald, 2004). CE research codifies strategies via R-frameworks and systems thinking (Kirchherr et al., 2017). Industry, science, and society thus share a pull need: translate CE principles into brand meaning.

These streams rarely converge at the brand level. Purpose claims, operational tactics, and communications often remain decoupled. Companies lack a concise logic to align them. Researchers lack a coherent construct to study how alignment affects perceptions and outcomes (Corvellec et al., 2022). The result is noise. Circular efforts get misread, ignored, or dismissed as symbolic. Perception gaps fuel accusations of inconsistency and greenwashing, even when practices towards a CE exist (Boyer et al., 2021; Brydges, 2021; Financial Times, 2025). How can branding integrate CE principles so that a brand's why, how, and what move in sync and so that stakeholder perceptions track what the brand actually does?

This paper introduces the Brand Circularity Model as a brand-level framework of coherence. It builds on established pillars rather than replacing them. The model distinguishes three interdependent layers: Envisioned Brand Circularity (purpose and normative commitments within conscientious brand values), Communicated Brand Circularity (strategic realization and signaling across touchpoints), and Enacted Brand Circularity (tangible and symbolic expressions in offerings aligned with CE principles) (Kirchherr et al., 2017; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Nascimento & Loureiro, 2024). The promise is pragmatic. Align intent, signals, and delivery so market interpretation becomes more reliable. This alignment offers managers a usable path and gives researchers a clear construct for theory building and measurement.

Core Principles of the CE
The CE is defined by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2012, p. 2) as a "new economic model [that] seeks to ultimately decouple global economic development from finite resource consumption ". Its core principles can be firstly grouped into R-frameworks (e.g., 3R: reduce, reuse, recycle; 4R: recover; extended to 10R refuse, rethink, repair, refurbish, remanufacture, repurpose). They provide the practical *how and what to do* of circular strategies (Zhu et al., 2010a; Reh, 2013) and establish a waste hierarchy, prioritizing prevention over reuse and recycling (European Parliament & Council, 2008; Potting et al., 2017). Secondly, a systems perspective is presented (Kirchherr et al., 2017). Consequently, rethinking production and consumption, moving beyond waste management toward regenerative design. Building on *cradle-to-cradle* (McDonough & Braungart, 2002), it emphasizes a shift toward closed-loop systems.

Positioning Brand Circularity in the Branding Landscape
Building on established sustainability-branding scholarship, Brand Circularity can be positioned constructively rather than by absence. Nascimento and Loureiro (2024) offer a rigorous cartography of concepts - from ethical consumerism to sustainable marketing. Ethical consumerism shows that moral concerns (fairness, labor rights, environmental responsibility) guide purchase choices through boycotts and preference for certified offers

(Auger et al., 2003). Green brands demonstrate that reduced environmental impact can be translated into differentiating brand attributes and price premiums via credible eco-claims and positioning (Papista & Krystallis, 2019). Sustainable marketing articulates long-term value creation and stakeholder orientation as strategic principles, thereby aligning market offerings with intergenerational responsibility (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017). Research on sustainable consumer behavior confirms that awareness of long-horizon consequences fuels activism and adoption of fair-trade, organic, and second-hand options (Hosta & Zabkar, 2021). The triple bottom line frames brand value as multidimensional - financial, environmental, and social - and thus extends accountability architectures for brand management (Norman & MacDonald, 2004). Within this landscape, sustainable brands are described as integrating environmental, social, and economic sustainability into identity and practice, with transparency, ethical sourcing, and eco-efficient production as hallmarks consistent with sustainable development and triple bottom line thinking (Nascimento & Loureiro, 2024). Conscientious Corporate Brands advance this integration by centering ethical leadership, stakeholder co-creation, and CSR in the brand's operating system, embedding a long-term commitment to societal impact into governance and culture (Abratt & Kleyn, 2023; Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Taken together, these streams already supply definitional clarity, strategic guardrails, and measurement-adjacent constructs on which to stand: values that guide choice, attributes that differentiate, strategies that embed stewardship, and evaluation frameworks that broaden accountability. Building on these shoulders, Brand Circularity denotes the integration of circular-economy principles into brand identity and practice as coherence between what a brand envisions and what it communicates and enacts. A coherence that, in turn, might shape how circularity is perceived by stakeholders. This positioning complements, rather than replaces, green and sustainable branding: it focuses the lens on the alignment work that links circular business models and service designs to brand meaning and stakeholder trust, consistent with conscientious-branding logics of purpose, co-creation, and stakeholder alignment (Iglesias & Ind, 2023; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Olsen & Peretz, 2011). Empirical signals reinforce the need for this alignment focus: consumers demand credible evidence yet struggle to assess degrees of circularity and resort to subjective judgments (Boyer et al., 2021), and early findings suggest that perceived brand circularity can shape attitudes and intentions (Herz & Hillebrandt, 2024). Prior calls for integrated branding-circularity approaches, including in fashion, further underscore the opportunity to synthesize operational CE principles with brand meaning work (Brydges, 2021). The constructive contribution, therefore, is not to claim a vacuum but to connect existing pillars into a brand-level model of circularity that specifies how purpose and practice are made coherent and communicable, so that market perceptions can reliably track what brands actually do.

Distinction from existing approaches
Compared to existing approaches, the *Brand Circularity Model* contributes in three important ways. First, it treats circularity as embedded in brand identity rather than as an external marketing claim. Second, it highlights layered coherence by linking structural (Why-How-What) and cultural (Values-Rituals-Symbols) dimensions. Third, it foregrounds stakeholder perception, recognizing that authenticity and trust depend on how circularity is experienced by all stakeholders as audiences.

In contrast, green branding focuses mainly on eco-attributes, and sustainable branding emphasizes balancing social, environmental, and economic dimensions. CCB s are a very holistic concept, yet it might be the "true north" (Grimm et al. 2025) in the envisioned core of Brand Circularity. This is because in a realistic market it is not always possible to act in a conscious, normative way. However, striving to do so in an iterative process is thought to be the direction of a circular brand. Brand circularity, however, positions the brand as a cultural

agent of transformation, aligning identity, communication, and stakeholder experience around circular principles.

Brand Circularity refers to the integration of CE principles into brand identity and practice. It is for the first time defined as the *coherence between envisioned, communicated, and enacted circularity*, achieved by embedding CE strategies into brand purpose, strategy, and products.

How conceptual foundations are combined

The Golden Circle (Sinek, 2009) is a well-known model in management that suggests organizations gain clarity and resonance by addressing three layers of meaning: *Why* (their purpose), *How* (the processes or strategies by which they realize that purpose), and *What* (the tangible outcomes or products they deliver as a manifestation of morality). Although the model was originally designed as a tool for leadership and communication, it has found practical application in branding (Durst et al., 2025) where it reflects the layered way in which brands convey their identity to stakeholders. Linking leadership and management is needed to implement CE principles as well (Barros et al., 2024).

The Cultural Onion (Hofstede et al., 2010) also conceptualizes culture in layers. At the center are *values*, which are expressed through practices such as *rituals*, *narratives*, and *heroes*, and eventually manifest in *symbols*. When applied to branding, this framework shows that brands cannot be reduced to functional products or marketing messages; rather, they are cultural constructions that derive meaning from values, practices, and symbolic expressions.

The strength of combining the Golden Circle with the Cultural Onion lies in their complementarity. The Golden Circle provides a structural logic of *why–how–what*, while the Cultural Onion emphasizes the cultural depth of *values*, *practices*, and *symbols*. Taken together, they allow us to think about brand circularity as both a structural alignment and a cultural embedding. Circularity, in this view, is not an isolated claim but part of the cultural identity of a living brand.

Circularity as a Brand Attribute

Circularity is conceptualised as an emerging brand attribute that expresses a brand's regenerative orientation and long-term accountability. In line with Kapferer's (2012) Brand Identity Prism, attributes represent the visible and symbolic features through which a brand's identity becomes recognisable. They connect what a brand is with what it communicates. It signals coherence between a brand's purpose, practices, and market manifestations, what the brand envisions, enacts, and communicates. This reframes circularity from an external sustainability claim into an intrinsic property of brand identity and perception. In doing so, circularity joins responsibility as key symbolic attributes of conscientious brands, aligning internal commitments with stakeholder meaning (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Abratt & Kleyn, 2023).

Methodology

It seems that at the intersection of branding research and the CE, a coherent model that explains CE principles at the brand level is lacking. Conceptual work is therefore essential (Kozlenkova et al., 2025). Thus, this paper follows an abductive research strategy, drawing on Haig's (2005) *Abductive Theory of Method (ATOM)*. By employing this methodology, the paper contributes a novel, culturally sensitive conceptual model of brand circularity. The abductive logic ensures that the model is not merely a normative extension of existing concepts but a theoretically robust framework addressing an observed gap in sustainability branding research.

The Brand Circularity Model

Following Kapferer (2012), this research distinguishes between brand identity as the internal, value-based core of the brand and brand image as the external perception of brand attributes. Within this framework, Conscientious Brand Purpose represents the identity level (WHY), Brand Circularity reflects a perceived attribute at the image level (HOW), and Circular Brand products and services function as the observable manifestations that link identity and image (WHAT). This alignment provides the conceptual foundation for the proposed model.

The model proposes a way of thinking about circularity as a property of the brand itself. It is embedded in identity, expressed in communication, and manifested in offerings. It is not meant to be a checklist. It is a coherence logic. At its core stand three interdependent dimensions. First, Envisioned Brand Circularity (Why / Values): the brand's normative commitments to circular principles as a Conscientious Corporate Brand, anchored in purpose and governance. These commitments set direction and define what "good" looks like for the brand. Second, Communicated Brand Circularity (How / Practices and Narratives): the strategic realization of circularity across stakeholder touchpoints. Here, the brand translates intent into visible practice and meaning, through storytelling, partnerships, service rituals, disclosures, and other signals that render circularity credible and legible. Third, Enacted Brand Circularity: the stakeholder experience of circularity as both tangible and symbolic. People encounter it in products and services designed for reuse, repair, and regeneration, and in the cues, such as logos, campaigns, design languages, that encode circular identity. Together, these dimensions form a closed loop of meaning and action. Purpose informs signaling and practice. Perception of products feeds back to refine purpose. The result is brand circularity as coherence over time, from envisioned values to communicated practices to what tangible cues and products stakeholders actually perceive.

Figure 1 The Brand Circularity Model.
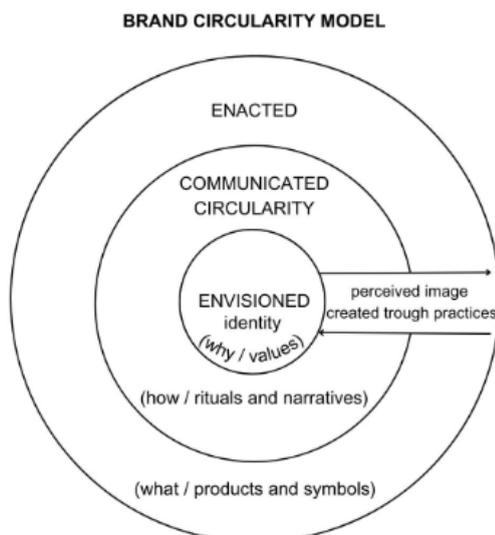
The Brand Circularity Model can be imagined as a circle in motion. At its core lies the envisioned brand circularity, the brand's inner engine. For the fictional outdoor brand Liora, this is the conviction that adventure should leave no scars on nature, expressed in a purpose to

design durable, repairable products. Surrounding this core is the communicated brand circularity, the pathways that carry the engine's force outward. Liora brings its commitment to life through visible practices: repair stories, return programs, and collaborations with second-hand platforms. Finally comes the perceived brand circularity, the surface where stakeholders actually touch the brand. Here, circularity becomes tangible in the feel of recycled fabrics of backpacks, the ease of replacing worn straps, and the circular logo symbolizing continuity. If all three layers rotate in harmony, the brand appears authentic (Nunes et al., 2021). When intention, communication, and perception do not align, brands might risk being accused of inconsistency or greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Theoretical and Managerial contributions

The Brand Circularity Model makes three main contributions. First, it introduces Brand Circularity as a new idea that goes beyond concepts like green or sustainable branding. Second, it combines three existing frameworks, the Golden Circle, the Cultural Onion and the Brand Identity Prism, into one model. This creates a layered view on circular branding that is both structural and cultural. Third, it expands the discussion around the CE by linking it with branding. It implies that cultural perception and symbolic alignment are important drivers for real systemic change.

The model also offers implications for practice. It shows managers how to integrate circularity into their brand strategies. First, circularity should be anchored in the brand's deeper purpose and values, the "why". Second, communication and business practices need to reflect these commitments in a consistent and strategic way, the "how." Finally, managers should focus on delivering both tangible results and symbolic expressions that stakeholders can clearly recognize as circular, the "what". The approach also serves as a warning. Brands that communicate circularity without trustable practices, or that implement practices without aligning them with identity, risk losing trust and being accused of opportunism.

Discussion

The Brand Circularity Model introduces that brands can act not merely as communicators of sustainability claims but as agents of transformation that structurally and culturally embed CE principles. By framing circularity as the coherence between brand identity, strategic communication, and product level objectification, the model addresses a central gap in both branding and sustainability research.

The key contribution lies in its capacity to show how limited material resources can be transformed into unlimited cultural and societal impact. By anchoring circularity in coherence, brands are theorized to not only strengthen their own legitimacy but also accelerate the broader transition from linear to regenerative systems. In this sense, the Brand Circularity Model advances branding research, enriches CE discourse, and offers managers actionable guidance, while positioning branding itself as a structural driver of systemic change. The model underscores that circular branding is not about doing more with less but about making more out of less. Ultimately, it is suggested to act as an accelerator to shift from a linear to a CE. At the same time, the model's conceptual status calls for empirical testing and refinement. Also, a theoretically grounded measure is needed. The model addresses a central gap in sustainability branding and provides the foundation for a critical discussion.

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