

Designing a Communication Model for Sustainability in the Post – Pandemic Era

Ioana Maria Popescu (Iacobescu)¹, Alexandru Jurconi², Robert Bumbac³ and Rodica Pamfilie⁴

¹⁾²⁾³⁾⁴⁾ Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

E-mail: popescuim@yahoo.com; E-mail: alex.jurconi@gmail.com

E-mail: robert.bumbac@com.ase.ro; E-mail: rodica.pamfilie@com.ase.ro

Please cite this paper as:

Popescu (Iacobescu), I.M., Jurconi, A., Bumbac, R. and Pamfilie, R., 2022. Designing a Communication Model for Sustainability in the Post – Pandemic Era. In: R. Pamfilie, V. Dinu, C. Vasiliu, D. Pleșea, L. Tăchiciu eds. 2022. 8th BASIQ International Conference on New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption. Graz, Austria, 25-27 May 2022. Bucharest: ASE, pp.695-702.

DOI: 10.24818/BASIQ/2022/08/092

Abstract

Sustainability is one of the global key trends amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic. The main economic players took action in setting the sustainability goals in their organizations and bringing sustainability at the top of their priorities. Sustainability is now at the beginning of all innovation and development processes.

The way sustainability is understood by all involved actors will drive the success of the sustainability projects. From the last study we have conducted, one of the most important conclusion was the fact that as long as consumers are educated and informed about sustainability measures they are open to get involved and are enough motivated to take action. The main goals are compelled by authorities and underlined by NGOs, implemented and adopted by the economic environment, the producers and the retailers or trade channels. Their task is to set the main measures for implementing the proper sustainability related projects, so they should be called drivers in the communication process of sustainability and the consumers could follow, becoming the followers in this important task.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the main players of the sustainability communication process, to find a way they could act together and to design an original model for communicating sustainability. The model could be used by the main sustainability players in order to find a common ground, for creating motivation and setting the main objectives and measures for reaching the sustainability goals.

Keywords

Sustainability, communication, key trends, marketing-mix.

DOI: 10.24818/BASIQ/2022/08/092

Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic gave us time to rethink our priorities and goals. We as individuals, the companies as business and the governments and NGOs as authorities. Together we could contribute to a sustainable future development. We started to be more sensitive at the environment protection issues; we have set sustainability measurable goals, we placed sustainability at the beginning of our management strategies and innovation processes. We've approached sustainability from all levels: our environment, our people and our economy, involving our companies, our products, our processes and digitalization.

In terms of context, Bodenheimer and Leidenberger (2020, p. 68) stated "lack of ecological sustainability contributed to the coronavirus outbreak," "lack of economic sustainability contributed to its rapid and global spread," and "lack of social sustainability contributed to its severity." As a result, the authors concluded that 'it is therefore important to proceed with the utmost care in designing communication strategies that create any type of association between the COVID-19 pandemic (which is a threatening situation with highly negative connotations) and sustainability transitions (which should ideally be associated with positive connotations)'.¹

A similar study was ruled out by El-Sharif (2021), who stated that "improved tracking, assessment, and communication around the sustainability agenda would catalyze the requisite political buy-in to turn green transition plans into actions."

The need to shift from a ‘carbon neutrality’ to a ‘carbon regenerative’ economy was elaborated by Lelievre (2021), resulting in a process that ‘restores, renews or revitalizes an organization’s sources of energy or materials; and integrates business needs with the integrity of nature’. According to the author, ‘this strategy demonstrates how sustainability is becoming strategically integrated not only into a company’s operations but extending into its products and services in a way that benefits communities.’

What we have learned from the last study we have conducted is that consumers pretend that authorities and companies or brands are responsible to start and communicate the sustainability projects and issues and they should act in order to start the education process for consumers. The main objective is to get them involved and finally to take action.

Brands considered the consumers attention to sustainability and rethink the way they innovate and communicate. They started to be as transparent as possible, offering consumers as many information as needed. Still innovation is at the start of their growth strategies confirming the statement that there is no sustainable development without innovation (Maier et al., 2019).

The specific problem that we would like to address in this paper is the fact that all communication on sustainability is done decentralized. Each of the main players approach sustainability individually. The governments set the legal requirements/ approach, and the companies tried to set their objectives in line with the government’s requirements. No matter the company profile, producer, retailer or services provider, all of them tried to comply. Moreover, after setting their compliance approach, in the next step they communicate their sustainability approach strategy to consumers, by taking public engagements and setting their own sustainability goals. Still, there is a decentralized communication. Even the objectives are common and the deadlines are the same, each of the players which take action do this on his own.

In this paper we offer a model for identifying the convergent projects for sustainability communication and the way communication could be done in order to have the same message, reason to believe, proper communication channels and proper approach strategy.

We’ve structured our paper in four parts. After setting the context and reason why in the first part of the paper, in the second part we’ve analyzed the empiric research data on consumers for confirming their bidding to get involved and to find the best way to do that. In the third part of the paper, we have pointed out the need of a common approach in sustainability communication and offered a model for a successful approach. In the last part we draw conclusions on the proposed model, giving recommendation on how this could be used.

1. Review of the scientific literature

Green deal set the plan for transforming our economy, our way of doing business, and the society transformation in order to meet the challenges of the future, because the climate change is one of the biggest challenge of the moment. We are considered the generation that still can act. When we think on sustainability, we have to take into account projects from all the three dimensions on which this is developed and implemented: economic, social, environmental.

The blueprint given by the Green Deal was translated in businesses objectives (such as reducing food waste, reducing plastic use, improving the nutritional profiles of produces food, zero carbon foot print) for some years already, but this was never as visible as in the pandemic period. It seems that the pandemic gives us more time to offer sustainability the importance it deserved.

Past studies on sustainability in the agri-food sector were focusing on the sustainability of farming, and not on the supply chain as a whole (Andreoli and Tellarini, 2000; Pannell and Glen, 2000). More recent surveys seem to focus on the whole agri-food supply chain. For example, Blanke and Burdick (2005), compared two apple supply chains (from the farm level to consumer), one local and one international. A supply chain view of sustainability was also followed in a research by Vasileiou and Morris, (2006). In their research on the British fresh potato supply chain identified and explained the perceptions of the importance of sustainability attributes held by key participants in the supply chain. Yakovleva (2007), approached the concept of sustainability also in a broader, non firm-based view, by assessing the UK chicken and potato supply chain comprising stages of agriculture, food processing, food wholesaling, food retailing and food catering. Sustainability indicators, need to be easy to measure, understandable and meaningful – especially as we move to cover the entire supply chain. Not surprisingly, the literature review identified that most of the efforts in developing sustainability indicators tend to focus on environmentally related strategies and practices of business but not on their social practices (Sharma and Ruud, 2003; Collins et al., 2007).

2. Materials and research methodology

As a first step we have analyzed the context of the sustainability and the way it is communicated. We had in focus the main producers from the Romanian market and the way they implement and communicate their sustainability projects, goals and measures.

In the second step, we use the quantitative research method (survey research based on questionnaire) for analyzing a part of the answers from our empiric research conducted in December 2021. The researched tried to find out the Romanian perception on sustainable packaging. In the last part of the questionnaire, we had questions regarding the responsible parts for the sustainability communications and how the consumers perceived the involvement of producers, retailers or traders and authorities. We analyzed all relevant questions and answers for pointing out the need of consistent communication and design of convergent projects.

In the last part we developed the communication model of sustainability after Covid-19, taking into consideration the main actors for that and the steps that are necessary to go through.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Context of the sustainability and the way it is communicated

Many of the brands had shared their sustainability goals and the measures to achieve these goals, with their consumers, becoming more transparent in their decision making processes, in their innovation process and in their strategic development process, proposing the proper public messages (Jurconi, Pamfilie and Lupu, 2021). Goals are aligned with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.

Table no. 1. Published sustainability goals of main producers on the Romanian market

Company	Goals (Economic, Social, Environmental)
Nestle	Bottles with 25% recycled plastic Until 2030, zero environment impact 100% of packaging to be recyclable or reusable 2025. Until 2050 zero carbon emissions
Unilever	50% virgin plastic reduction by 2025, including an absolute reduction of 100,000 tonnes 25% recycled plastic by 2025 Collect and process more plastic than we sell by 2025 100% reusable, recyclable or compostable plastic packaging by 2025 Halve food waste in our operations by 2025 Maintain zero waste to landfill in our factories
Mondelez	Cocoa Life: 100% volume for chocolate brands sourced through Cocoa Life by 2025* Palm oil forest monitored: 100% by 2025**** Palm oil RSPO certified: 100% by 2025 (since 2013) CO2: 15% reduction in CO2 emissions across manufacturing operations by 2020** Recyclability: 100% of packaging designed to be recycled, labeled with recycling info by 2025 Human Rights: 100% human rights due diligence system coverage in own operations & tier-1 suppliers by 2025 Cocoa Life communities in West Africa by 2025*** Increase representation percentage of women in executive leadership roles by 2024**
Danone	net zero carbon emissions by 2050 across our full supply chain. packaging 100% reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2025. By 2025, to reach 50% of recycled material on average in our plastic packaging, going up to 100% r-PET for our water business in Europe. Danone's ambition is to reduce the use of virgin plastic in packaging by 33% by 2025 (baseline 2019). Promote a shift to flexitarian diets through increased sales of our plant-based products. By 2025 we aim to triple the sales revenue from our plant-based products to reach €5 billion (baseline 2018).

Company	Goals (Economic, Social, Environmental)
	<p>For ingredients grown in highly water stressed areas, Danone commits to the following by 2030: Reduce total water use 25% and optimize fertilizer usage at the farm level for 75% of volumes of milk, fruit, almond & soy;</p> <p>reduce food waste within our operations and supply chain by half by 2030.</p> <p>100% recycled or certified virgin paper (FSC, PEFC or equivalent) ▪ 100% traceable soy for our plant-based products; and</p> <p>100% RSPO Segregated palm oil.</p>
Mars	<p>packaging 100% reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2025.</p> <p>reduction in CO2 emissions across manufacturing operations with 27% by 2025 and with 67% until 2050.</p>
Ferrero	<p>100% of our packaging to be reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2025</p> <p>Until 2030 reduce absolute Scope 1 and 2 emissions by 50% from a 2018 base year.</p> <p>Until 2030 reduce Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions intensity by 43% per tonne of product produced from a 2018 base year.</p>
Dr. Oetker	<p>By 2025 to optimize the nutritional profiles of its products and reduce the use of salt, sugar and fat by up to 20 %.</p> <p>By 2022 the company will achieve climate neutrality at all locations</p> <p>The amount of food waste that Dr. Oetker can directly influence will be reduced by 25 % by 2025.</p> <p>all packaging materials can be recycled by 2025</p> <p>Dr. Oetker plans to make its supply chains sustainable - both socially and ecologically.</p> <p>aim of completely pre-venting occupational accidents, will implement a management system that complies with the internationally recognized certification standard ISO 45001 at all production sites by 2025.</p>
Coca Cola	<p>Reduce direct carbon emissions ratio by 30%</p> <p>50% of our refrigerators in customer outlets will be energy efficient</p> <p>50% of total energy used in our plants will be from renewable and clean sources</p> <p>100% of the total electricity used in our plants in EU and Switzerland will be from renewable and clean sources</p> <p>Help secure water availability for all our communities in water risk areas</p> <p>Source 100% of key agricultural ingredients in line with sustainable agricultural principles</p> <p>Reduce water use in plants located in water risk areas by 20%</p> <p>100% of our consumer packaging will be recyclable</p> <p>Reduce by 25% the calories per 100ml of sparkling soft drinks</p> <p>Source 35% of the total PET we use from recycled PET and/or PET from renewable material</p> <p>Help collect the equivalent of 75% of our primary packaging</p> <p>Target zero fatalities and reduce (lost time) accident rate by 50%</p> <p>50% of manager positions will be held by women</p> <p>10% community participants will join first-time managers' development programmes</p> <p>10% of employees will take part in volunteering initiatives</p>

Source: The producers' websites. Published sustainability goals.

During pandemic period, setting the short-term priorities was quite challenging and even harder the plans and priorities for mid- to long-term, so bringing sustainability at the top of priorities and innovation processes was the right thing to do. Even this will drive decreases in profitability in short term the expectations are like all these efforts to drive a healthy growth on long term.

The way sustainability is communicated does matter. The messages were adjusted in communicating the positive impact with creative stories on mass-media and visible product claims in-stores much more than before the pandemic period and for sure this will increase in the near future. The businesses commitments will be more visible and linked to their sustainability activities.

The mandatory ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) reporting will drive companies' transparency and will increase the perceived value of the companies and is expected to have impact in investing decisions or employee preferences for certain companies.

3.2 Key aspects regarding communication during the pandemic period

During pandemic period, the brands/ companies should rethink the way they communicate with consumers and they decrease the number of new products launches. The communication during the pandemic period was done with care, with focus on brand value and purpose and less focus on products or promotions. Another effect during the pandemic period was the decrease in number of innovations. During that period were launched and communicated less innovations or new products launches. For sure in the near future, as compensation innovations will increase and will be more consistent in terms of needs that will cover.

3.3 Why do we need a model for sustainability communication?

We have conducted an empirical study on 280 respondents, with the following profile: Men and women, aged between 30-65 years, living in the urban area of Romania, with medium and high incomes (75% with incomes for 5000 lei). Fields of activity in production, trade or consulting and education, with professional status as an employee (66%), high level of education (94% university and post-university), who often read the labels of the food they buy and want to live in a less polluted environment. Followers of the latest trends in fashion, cooking or lifestyle. Not always able to keep up, but positive and eager.

Considering that for the end-consumer one of the most tangible part of sustainability is the environment protection, we wanted to find out how they perceive the food sustainable packaging and what the main benefit of using sustainable packaging is. Another aspect we wanted to investigate was their expectations regarding the actions the main players could implement in order to proper communicate the sustainability of packaging.

Out of the total number of respondents 201 (72%) are preoccupied by the impact of food packaging on the environment, answering with (I am preoccupied a lot and I am extremely preoccupied on the impact of food packaging on the environment).

A consistent part of the respondents 81%, identify living in a less polluted environment, as the main benefit of using sustainable packaging.

Regarding the responsibility, cost and communication of the transit from the classic to sustainable packaging, we could not point out only one responsible part, as the opinions were quite balanced splitted between food producers, traders, education system, NGOs. Still the education system was the highest rated, pointing out the necessity of an entire chapter in "Ecological Education" textbooks. (The possible answers were: Food producers should bear the full cost the transition from classic to sustainable packaging; It is the exclusive role of the traders to organize campaigns to educate consumers about it; sustainable food packaging Sustainability should cover an entire chapter in "Ecological Education" textbooks; Civil society trust in non-governmental organizations Government justifies their key role in promoting the principles of the circular economy in the ranks citizens; Talking about sustainability is a fad, for as long mankind has so many other problems).

Regarding the role of the State Authorities in the domain of sustainable packaging, the most important one was the one related to mass-media communication: *to be included in the program schedule of the national television weekly shows dedicated to the circular economy* (the other possible answers were: To create the legislative framework necessary for the transition of the industry food to sustainable packaging; To check the correct application of the unique marking and distinctive feature of food sustainability sustainable packaging; To regulate the price of sustainable packaging through subsidies to producers of biodegradable raw materials; To provide state aid to producers who wish to invest in sustainable food packaging technologies;)

One of the research conclusion is that we need a common approach for communicating the food packages sustainability, starting from the authorities, continuing with the implementation in production companies and in-stores, communicating a consistent and clear message by the education system and after purchase, taking action in house-holds.

4. Communication Model for Sustainability in the Post – Pandemic Era

The main actors for a successful communication model are all active parts, directly involved in the process: the State Authorities, Non-Governmental Organizations, companies and brands, retailers and consumers.

Governments should start to play a greater role to facilitate the transition not only with targets and policies but also with communication on their specific channels. The implementation of European Directive by developing a national legislative framework and propose an action plan or developing a guide for the companies about how the law requirements should be implemented in their activity.

Facilitating meetings with the representatives of main actors from the action plan: authorities, NGOs, retailers, production companies, consumers. This could be easier implemented through their national organizations.

Taking into consideration that all communication will start from the Authorities together with the Retail and Production companies and NGOs, we consider that these entities could be defined as the driver of our communication of sustainability.

The main beneficiary of all sustainability communication of drivers are the consumers, which should continue the sustainability related efforts in their daily activities, from outside of home and at home, so we consider that they can be called followers in the communication process.

1. Mapping the importance of the main sustainability communication actors

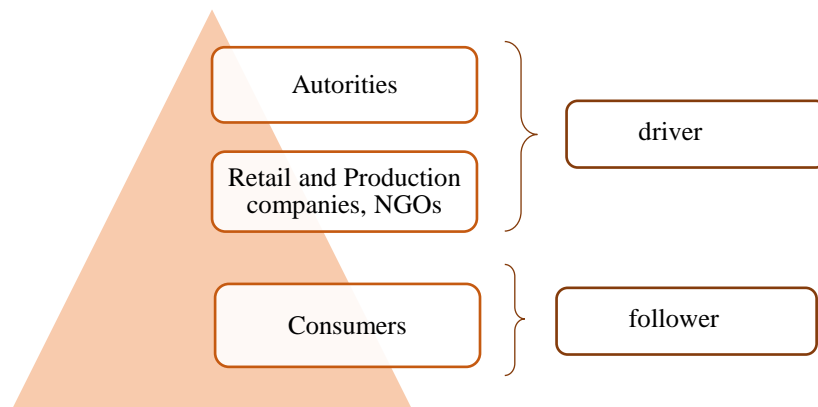


Figure no. 1. Mapping the importance of the main sustainability communication actors

In order to create a consistent message to all involved parts, is required to bring together all needed resources: sustainability activities, well defined in the sustainability related projects, with clear goals, measures and timings, the clear message or reason to believe for credible and relevant communication and the proper communications channels.

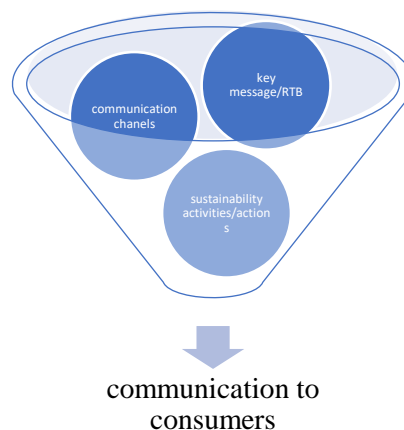


Figure no. 2. Bring together all needed resources for relevant communication to consumers

2. Finding the convergent projects for all involved parts.

Creating an alignment of the commitments at the same set of values and goals for:

- developing projects together
 - developing key messages for communicating the sustainability projects and goals
 - identifying the right channels for communication
 - developing the in-store implementation strategy
 - developing a plan for communication on shelves or on products packages using the same symbols or layout sustainability graphics
3. Financial commitment, in order to start the implementation of convergent projects.
 4. Projects implementation and on-going efficiency improvement
 5. Ending the projects and communicating the results on the right channels and with the relevant message
 6. Assessment / Evaluation of all implemented projects

For generating the communication model for sustainability we've made a possible projection using the 4P marketing-mix:

Product – in this model we considered that the products is the Sustainability

Price – are all financial resources in order to find, implement and communicate the convergent projects related to sustainability

Promotion – are all the communication efforts of the convergent projects

Placement – is the entire process of identifying the convergent projects, their implementation, the conversion to the right message for communication

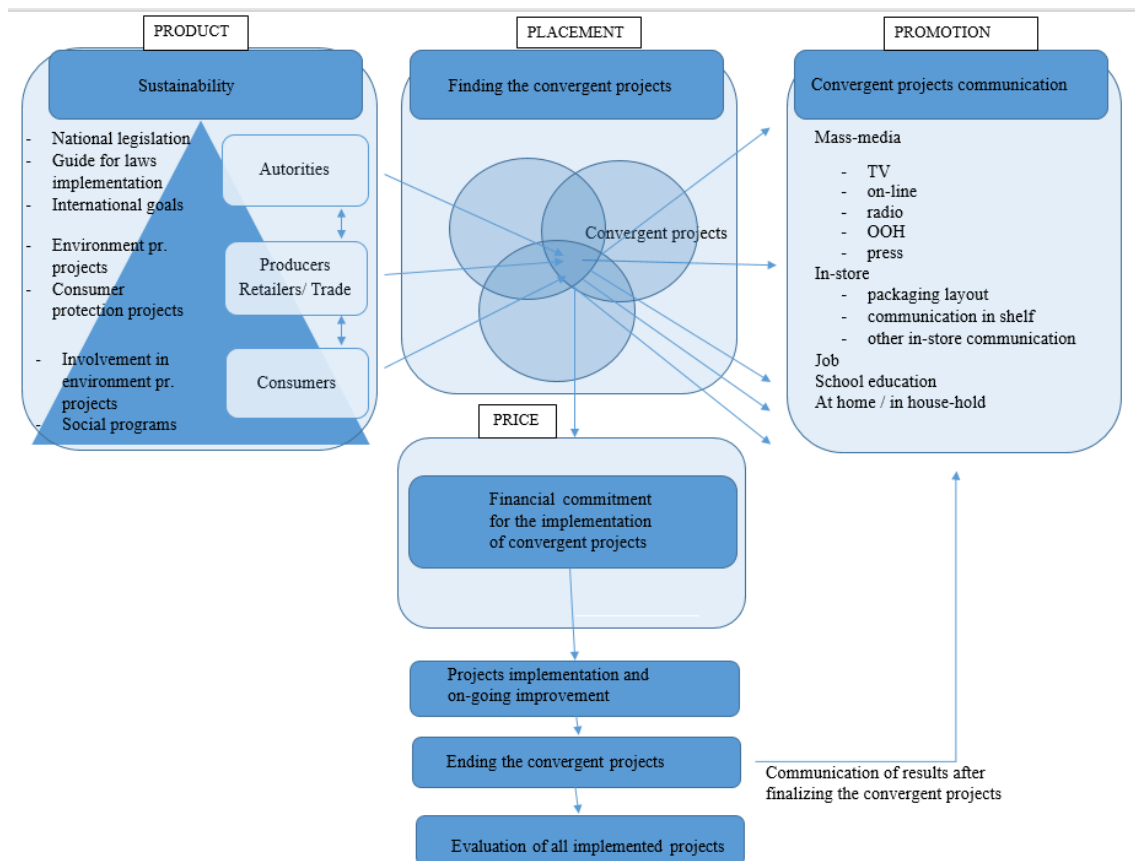


Figure no. 3. Representing the communication model for sustainability

Conclusions

The main objective of the paper was to confirm that we need a communication model for sustainability. For that we have analyzed the results of our empiric research and confirmed that there is a need for implementing sustainability related projects and to communicate them properly. In the next phase, we identified the main players for the communication of sustainability and advanced a possible common approach of the projects and communication. We consider that, at this moment, there is a lack of information at consumer level regarding sustainability and one of the reasons could be the fact that communication of sustainability projects and goals is done decentralized. Our challenge was to point out a way of how this could be done centralized. The 4P marketing-mix was used for fulfilling the Communication model and we tried to answer at the main communication questions, what? "how, who, when, where, why, and to whom?" (Xiong, et al., 2020). We conclude that sustainability should be communicated and the best way to do this is to have a common approach. For that, in our model, after defining the main actors for communication we identified the convergent projects as the common action and communication tool. The next step in our model was to finance and implement the convergent projects and to communicate the progresses and results. The communication of sustainability projects should be clear and transparent. The model could be adopted by the sustainability projects owners which could enlarge the project promoters base and could implement the proper communication to consumers in order to achieve their involvement on short and long-term.

References

- Andreoli, M. and Tellarini, V., 2000. Farm sustainability evaluation: methodology and practice. *Agriculture, Ecosystems & Environment*, [online] 77(1–2), pp.43–52. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-8809\(99\)00091-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-8809(99)00091-2).
- Blanke, M. and Burdick, B., 2005. Food (miles) for Thought - Energy Balance for Locally-grown versus Imported Apple Fruit (3 pp). *Environmental Science and Pollution Research - International*, [online] 12(3), pp.125–127. <https://doi.org/10.1065/espr2005.05.252>.
- Bodenheimer, M. and Leidenberger, J., 2020. COVID-19 as a window of opportunity for sustainability transitions? Narratives and communication strategies beyond the pandemic. *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, [online] 16(1), pp.61–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2020.1766318>.
- Collins, E., Lawrence, S., Pavlovich, K. and Ryan, C., 2007. Business networks and the uptake of sustainability practices: the case of New Zealand. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, [online] 15(8–9), pp.729–740. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2006.06.020>.
- El-Sharif, S., 2021. *The strategic importance of evaluation and communication for green recovery from COVID-19*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.eval4action.org/post/the-strategic-importance-of-evaluation-and-communication-for-green-recovery-from-covid-19>> [Accessed 6 March 2022].
- Jurconi, A., Pamfilie, R. and Lupu, R., 2021. Designing a Multi-Directional Communication Model for Eco-Innovations in the Soft Drinks Packaging. In: R. Pamfilie, V. Dinu, L. T chiciu, D. Ple ea, C. Vasiliu eds. 2021. *7th BASIQ International Conference on New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption*. Foggia, Italy, 3-5 June 2021. Bucharest: ASE, pp.681-689.
- Lelievre, M., 2021. *How COVID-19 Has Impacted Sustainability, Climate Change Strategies*, [online] Available at: <<https://sustainablebrands.com/read/defining-the-next-economy/how-covid-19-has-impacted-sustainability-climate-change-strategies>> [Accessed 18 March 2022].
- Maier D., Olaru M., Maftei M. and Maier A., 2019. Framework for measuring product innovation to support Sustainable development. In: *5th BASIQ International Conference, New Trends in Sustainable Business and Consumption*. Bucharest: ASE, pp.640-648.
- Pannell, D.J. and Glenn, N.A., 2000. A framework for the economic evaluation and selection of sustainability indicators in agriculture. *Ecological Economics*, [online] 33(1), pp.135–149. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0921-8009\(99\)00134-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0921-8009(99)00134-2).
- Sharma, S. and Ruud, A., 2003. On the path to sustainability: integrating social dimensions into the research and practice of environmental management. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, [online] 12(4), pp.205–214. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.366>.
- Vasileiou, K. and Morris, J., 2006. The sustainability of the supply chain for fresh potatoes in Britain. *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, [online] 11(4), pp.317–327. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13598540610671761>.
- Xiong,Z., Wang, P. and Zhao,Y., 2020. *Re-innovation from Failure, Institutional Environmental Differences, and Firm Performance: Evidence from China*. *Amfiteatrul Economic*, 22(53), pp.197-219.
- Yakovleva, N., 2007. Measuring the Sustainability of the Food Supply Chain: A Case Study of the UK. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, [online] 9(1), pp.75–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15239080701255005>.