

Identifying Incongruences due to Changes in Sustainable Experience Marketing in the Automotive Industry

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ABSTRACT,

Sustainability is one of the key challenges in the automotive industry. This thesis analyses the effects, organisational identity, practice and knowledge (IPK) have on the implementation of sustainable activities in experience marketing. Based on interviews with seven marketing managers from automotive manufacturers incongruences between the IPK domains and possible solutions to overcome them have been described. The findings reveal significant incongruences between knowledge and practice, that can be addressed with a more structured management approach, e.g. by increasing knowledge via studies and defining measurable objectives. Incongruences have also been identified between knowledge and identity. Depending on market segments, sustainability measures are considered to have different levels of credibility, additionally the role of experience marketing to influence this is questioned. Between identity and practice economic considerations seem to be a main driver of questions regarding identity related activities. The results have practical value for automotive manufacturers who aim to further implement sustainability aspects into their experience marketing. Research based on the underlying IPK framework has been extended by including the perspective of experience marketing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The current situation regarding environmental challenges such as global warming puts businesses in a situation where they face the need to act more sustainably in every regard (Benjamin, 2021). This necessary change in behaviour requires a complete systematic transformation across industries, companies, and people. The transition towards more sustainable actions requires systematic changes such as the more efficient usage of environmentally friendly materials (Olivetti & Cullen, 2018).

The automotive industry stands at the forefront of this change with its significant contribution to environmental pollution and an important role in global technological innovation trying to meet carbon emission targets and comply with international environmental agreements (Abedsoltan, 2024). The industry currently is in a huge transformational process of becoming sustainably friendly (Montemayor & Chanda, 2023). This transformation does not only include the transition from internal combustion engines (ICE) to electric vehicles (EV) but every functional area of any automobile manufacturer, e.g. meaning their marketing departments as well (Luppold & Theil, 2024).

This paper will dive more into this topic in the context of experience marketing in the automotive industry. Experience marketing represents the shift of companies from product-centric to customer-centric marketing approaches. By offering an improved and personalized customer experience they intend to build deeper relationships to differentiate from their competitors (Viturino, 2024). Experience marketing in the automotive industry includes motor shows, road shows, sponsoring and events. These can serve as a channel for implementing and communicating sustainability practices to build customer engagement and brand visibility (Håme, 2013).

Experience marketing is of particular importance because it traditionally involves big resource use and waste creation, especially in activities like booth building and event staging for motor shows and road shows (Núñez et al., 2009; Luppold & Theil, 2024). These activities are evolving continuously due to digital transformation, introducing new ways to interact with consumers such as virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR), which help reduce the environmental impact traditionally associated with large-scale events (Håme, 2013; Henriques & Winkler, 2021). Addressing these issues is important to align the industry's public initiatives with its internal organisational practices to ensure a comprehensive approach to sustainability.

According to Kump (2018), the necessary organisational changes often lead to incongruences between how external and employees perceive the company (identity), the operational activities (practice), and the fundamental knowledge about these activities (knowledge) during times of change. Alignment between these elements is crucial for the company's survival and success in navigating the sustainability transition. While Kump's framework provides a generic model for understanding organizational change, it does not offer specific insights for managing changes related to sustainability or in the automotive industry, which can involve unique challenges and opportunities.

It has shown that a shift towards integrating sustainability into these practices presents certain challenges across industries. These include matching the company's self-perceived identity as a sustainable innovator with its actual market practices to align with consumer expectations and regulatory standards (Lukin et al., 2022; Imre & Remsei, 2023). However, gaps remain in fully understanding how the connection and interaction between identity, practice, and knowledge within the IPK framework affects the effectiveness of sustainability transitions in the automotive industry. For example, supply chain challenges like the semiconductor shortage and cultural barriers such as consumer resistance

towards innovations like electric vehicles highlight the practical difficulties in aligning operational practices with a sustainable identity (Andwari et al., 2017; Kulkarni et al., 2023).

Changing market demands and regulations create the need to explore how these transformations impact the field of experience marketing within the automotive sector which is supported by the IPK framework (Kump, 2018). Despite a lot of discussions on the shift towards sustainability and digital transformation in the automotive industry, no research has been made on how these changes impact experience marketing. Some studies dive further into the reciprocal effects between digital transformation and the organisational identity but do not include the field of experience marketing (Boehm, 2022; Graf et al., 2023). This represents an important research gap.

Therefore, this paper aims to close this gap by identifying challenges organisations face at the intersection of identity, practice, and knowledge within experience marketing in the automotive industry and develop guiding insights to facilitate the change towards more sustainable practices. Finally, it aims to state reasons for these gaps and provide possible solutions for these, leading to the following research question:

“What are the key incongruences among identity, practice, and knowledge in the realm of sustainable experience marketing in the automotive industry, and what are possible ways of overcoming these challenges?”

This research advances the IPK framework (Kump, 2018) by applying it to the automotive industry's sustainability challenges within experience marketing. It contributes to theoretical knowledge on organizational adaptation to sustainability within experience marketing in the automotive industry, especially focusing on the discrepancies in identity, practice, and knowledge to facilitate this transition. Furthermore, the study offers possible starting points for future studies in this field.

Ideally, the identification and analysis of possible incongruences within the identity-practice-knowledge gap in context of experience marketing in the automotive industry provides valuable insights to be able to develop guiding aspects for managers to become more efficient in driving the sustainability transformation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following, information about the context of the thesis derived above will be presented. The review is divided into two subchapters to introduce all different dimensions of the study.

2.1 Sustainability transformation in automotive and experience marketing

2.1.1 Sustainability in the automotive industry

Due to its large environmental footprint, the automotive industry is facing the need to become more environmentally sustainable which is likely to be one of the biggest transitions in its history (Lukin et al., 2022). These sustainable changes are not only including the product or the production but should be implemented in every department and function.

The currently most popular sustainability effort is about the establishment of more environmentally friendly EVs. The switch to develop and implement alternative drive types such as the electric one is caused by both, environmental regulations as well as a shift in consumer preferences of customers that want to decrease their emissions (Imre et al., 2023). Further, current changes are also including the sustainable production of vehicles, both ICEs and EVs, (Yuan & Dornfeld, 2009) which also includes the transformation of supply chains (Masoumi et al., 2019) or the identification of new business models (Júnior et al., 2019).

The previously described changes within the automotive industry are not happening without any difficulties. Part of the current biggest challenges are logistical problems such as the semiconductor shortage which is crucial to the production of modern (electric) vehicles (Kulkarni et al., 2023) as well as cultural problems such as the unwillingness of some customers to switch to electric vehicles due to prejudices regarding range (Andwari et al., 2017).

2.1.2 Role & transformation of experience marketing

The perception of companies by consumers regarding sustainability is becoming more and more important because consumers are increasingly aware of what corporate sustainability is about (Sukitsch et al., 2015), especially in the automotive industry. Here, experience marketing plays a fundamental role. Interactive events offer the consumers to experience innovations in real life to better understand the performance and the advantages of the product. Digital transformation helps to increase the quantity and quality of such interactions (Ziyadin, 2019).

As the automotive industry goes through broad sustainability challenges, every function is affected, hence the transformation is also happening in the field of experience marketing. This division, since traditionally very resource-intensive, is undergoing its own evolution to align with the broader sustainability goals of the industry (Núñez et al., 2009).

As part of this broad transformation, experience marketing must both reflect and influence these broader changes. Experience marketing in the automotive industry includes a wide range of activities - from motor shows, road shows, sponsorships, and diverse events. These events all aim at improving visibility and increasing customer engagement and communicate about topics such as products and services (Häme, 2013).

The trend of digital transformation has introduced new technologies and ideas to interact with customers. Making use of technologies such as VR or AR, as example to experience the external design or vehicle size (Henriques & Winkler, 2021), or livestreaming events (Yang, 2023) automotive manufacturers can connect with people all around the world at any time while avoiding pollution through travelling.

Furthermore, the traditional way of experience marketing in the form of motor shows as well fairs and other events comes with a large amount of waste generated by using temporary structures like booths and communal spaces (Núñez et al., 2009). Through the ongoing digitalization of experience marketing this problem is aimed to be tackled by adding technologies which can be used multiple times to create less waste (Ziyadin, 2019).

2.2 Sustainability transitions and organisational change

The IPK framework (Kump, 2019) focuses on the topic of organisational change, highlighting the significance of aligning the questions “Who are we?”, meaning self-perception, personality, and status (identity), “What do we perform?”, meaning habits, roles, and goals (practice) and “What do we know?”, meaning experience and skills (knowledge). Introducing new or transformed forms of experience marketing not only meets increasing consumer demand for sustainable practices but also comes with a certain organisational change process which includes challenges as companies aim to align their new marketing strategies with their broader sustainability goals. This process involves challenges as linking identity, practice and knowledge to avoid misalignment e.g. between the identity of seeing itself as a green and innovative company and the practice of using unsustainable materials, could keep the company away from transitioning towards more sustainability.

Previous papers have only researched using single parts of the IPK framework, rather than all three together. One paper has explored the challenges automotive firms face when their currently established identities conflict with the adoption of new digital technologies and business models. The study identifies specific identity tensions and barriers that occur at the organisational level, which can hinder the companies to change their strategies. These insights underscore the importance of considering organisational identity when pursuing strategic changes, in this case prompted by digital transformation (Boehm, 2022). This aligns with the IPK framework by showing how identity (who we are), practices (what we do), and knowledge (what we know) interact and often conflict during periods of change.

Another paper focuses on a similar field with the difference that it explores the broad impacts of digital transformation on the organisational identity within the automotive industry, highlighting the need for companies to evolve from traditional manufacturers to high tech mobility providers (Graf et al., 2023). The previously discussed paper on the other hand, analyses how digital transformation specifically affects strategy practices and identity crises within these companies. It focuses on identifying and analysing the tensions and barriers that arise from these identity shifts and their direct impacts on organisational operations and decision-making. For example, one identified tension is between chasing competitors versus shaping the market, which leads to reduced digital innovation and a reactive catch-up mentality. Additionally, an important barrier is the lack of risk-taking, which reduces confidence in driving change. These issues result in strategic ambiguity and inertia, which in the end affects decision-making and operational efficiency (Boehm, 2022).

2.3 Research gap

Existing literature extensively shows that there are a lot of ongoing changes in the automotive industry due to the topics such as sustainability or digital transformation. However, these studies primarily focus on topics such as production and the shift towards electric vehicles and have left out the exploration of how these shifts are influencing experience marketing. Furthermore, there has not been any application of the IPK framework to within experience marketing in the automotive industry.

Other studies have identified certain challenges that occur within the relationship between organisational identity and the digital transformation in the automotive industry (Boehm, 2022; Graf et al., 2023). Again, the focus on experience marketing was not given here either, as well as only the identity part of the IPK framework was considered but never the complete bundle of identity, practice and knowledge.

This oversight provides a significant research gap that this study aims to fill. Exploring this gap is relevant because it directly explores how incongruences within identity, practice and knowledge - especially those coming from rapid transformations in sustainability - affect experience marketing.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This research study was based on a qualitative analysis to uncover possible challenges companies are facing in relation to the incongruences among the practice-identity-knowledge framework in context of experience marketing in the automotive industry. A qualitative method was chosen as this enables a comprehensive understanding of complex problems has been developed, and rich, new, and detailed insights have been uncovered. This enabled addressing the details of how personal and organisation-wide identities, operational practices and knowledge levels were connected and influenced each other in the situational shift towards more sustainability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

3.2 Participant Selection

Theoretical sampling was used to select seven different interviewees with a fitting, diverse background to ensure that these had proper say and knowledge to gather insights from the perspective of the identity-practice-knowledge framework (Glaser & Strauss, 2006). For this study, the interviews specifically involved professionals from various major automotive manufacturers who are active in the field of experience marketing (Appendix B). These professionals were chosen because of their involvement in important decision-making and their ability to influence experience marketing strategies.

Participants were recruited based on direct contacting to ensure the selection of interviewees who are involved in experience marketing and sustainability efforts. This method provided a balanced mix of perspectives by including professionals from different roles, levels and automotive brands, ranging from luxury sports to budget-friendly vehicle brands. This diversity enriched the data with different insights and approaches to sustainability, which helped to create a sector-wide picture of the topic.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

The main data collection method used was semi-structured interviews, conducted online with employees working in the fields of experience marketing at several different automotive manufacturers across different countries. The objective of the interviews was the exploration of employees' experiences with their companies' marketing practices, identity regarding sustainable aspects, and underlying knowledge. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed the exploration of specific predetermined topics but also unexpected questions if needed, which enhanced the depth of the discussion (Aung et al., 2021).

A comprehensive interview guide structured around the IPK framework and previous research on the topic was created to facilitate a natural conversation flow and motivate the participants to share their thoughts (Appendix A). Ethical standards were maintained by asking the interviewees for their consent to the interview and the recording, and informing them about the study's purpose, their rights (such as their right to withdraw at any time), and measures taken to protect their anonymity or confidentiality. The retrieved data was stored securely and anonymized (Kallio et al., 2016).

3.4 Data Analysis

This combined deductive-inductive research approach guaranteed an extensive analysis aiming to reveal proper insights that contributed to the predefined framework (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The deductive part was based on the IPK framework (Kump, 2019) to explore incongruences in the field of experience marketing in the automotive industry. Predefined codes used were Situation, Identity, Practice, Knowledge, Challenges, Learnings and Recommendations. This approach fits well due to its ability to systematically categorize and analyse qualitative data according to existing frameworks and a specific research question. The inductive part enriched the analysis further by noting interesting quotations that did not fit the initial coding scheme but provided valuable perspectives (Forman et al., 2007).

To prepare the data for the analysis best, all seven interviews were transcribed verbatim and afterwards thoroughly reviewed against the recordings to ensure correctness and understandability (Stuckey, 2014). Further, a codebook has been written which included operational definitions for each code that corresponded to both the IPK framework, as well as sub-themes relevant to experience marketing that had been found through literature review (Neuendorf, 2018).

During the coding, these predefined codes were used to systematically categorize different parts in multiple rounds. That meant that text segments related to predefined sub-themes that were based on the IPK framework were assigned the corresponding codes (Neuendorf, 2018). In the first round-coding a structural coding approach was used, which enabled to divide the data into smaller pieces as a preparation for the next round. Following to this, the previously created groups were sorted in broader categories to lower the number of different categories (Depasquale et al., 2022). After these two steps, in the second round-coding, thematic analysis was used to scan all the accumulated sections and the associated codes again to find patterns and insights to answer the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017). In addition to this deductive coding approach, an inductive analysis was also conducted simultaneously to allow for the occurrence of new themes that were not initially expected. This involved reviewing the data repeatedly to define new codes that emerged directly from the interview content so that new insights or patterns relevant to the research question could be formed. Both, the inductive and deductive sides, were done by using the coding software tool ATLAS.TI Version 24.1.1.

Lastly, the codes were converted into broader categories that presented the major themes extracted from the interview data. These categories were then analysed to answer the research question and create key takeaways for the reader (Neuendorf, 2018).

This analysis led to the identification of eight different incongruences among the domains of identity, practice and knowledge specific to the context of sustainable experience marketing in the automotive industry. Additionally, to these incongruences, suggested solutions for resolving these issues to support more effective sustainability transitions were developed.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Current Change Situation

During the interviews it became clear that companies are employing several actions to become more sustainable in their experience marketing operations. Those practices can be summarised by six different groups of practices. First, sustainable transportation initiatives including the adoption of electric vehicles and the arrangement of a charging infrastructure to facilitate more eco-friendly travel of attendees. Waste reduction and sustainable materials involves going away from single-use plastics to more sustainable alternatives. Resource Efficiency includes using renewable energy sources and efficient electrical setups. Furthermore, digital innovations such as VR and paperless solutions are reducing the consumption of physical resources and enhance the event experience. Next to that, local engagement and hiring strategies include the employment of local staff and local sourcing to reduce CO2 and support communities. And lastly, standards for partnerships ensure that all partners are meeting sustainability goals including regular audits.

The interviews unveiled that during the implementation of these practices, companies are often facing certain knowledge gaps. These gaps include the understanding of norms and criteria, realizing what emission sources are within their actions and seeing all possibilities of as example new technologies. Contrary to that some companies mentioned that there are no knowledge gaps but that the change depends more on the attitude of employees.

Lastly, those mentioned practices are influencing the identity of the companies. Externally, there has been an improvement noted, especially for initiatives such as electric vehicles, but the historically less environmentally friendly identity is still overshadowing this. Internally, departments such as experience marketing are taking over roles of sustainability ambassadors which is impacting interactions between the departments.

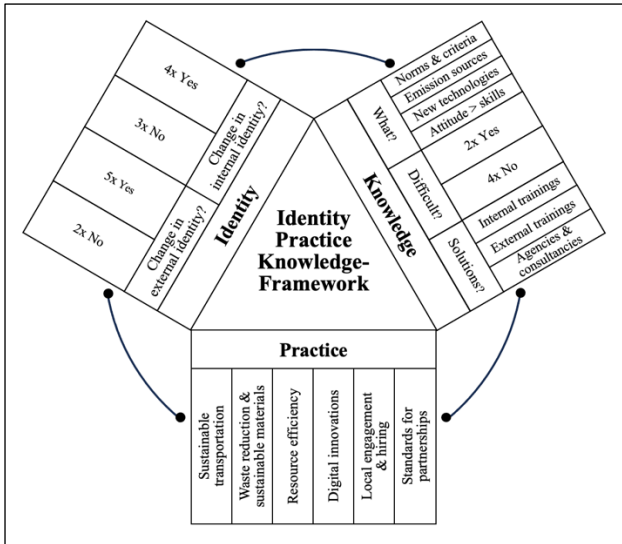


Figure 1: Results of the interviews

In the following, this chapter presents the primary results of the qualitative analysis as shown above. Those results are structured around the core codes - identity, practice, and knowledge – but are influenced by topics that came up during the analysis. They help to clarify the real-world implications of sustainability transitions in automotive experience marketing and highlight areas for improvement and further research.

4.2 Identity

The identity subchapter focuses on how sustainable practices are influencing the company’s identity, divided into external and internal perspectives based on the interview coding process.

4.2.1 External identity

Sustainable practices are mostly seen as improving the external identity of companies. Most of the interviewees (IP2, IP3, IP4, IP6, IP7) reported a positive change how they are being perceived. However, IP3 has said, “... you don’t get a standing ovation, but it is recognized very (...) positively” Further, IP2 has explained, “...here is a fine line between changing image and what has to be done as a hygiene factor (...) it has prevented our image from deteriorating”.

On the other hand, some responses indicated that sustainable practice have not yet really changed their identity (IP1, IP5). IP5 has said, “...this is still overshadowed by the negative image that I think all car manufacturers still have, and we as a sports car manufacturer in particular”. Nevertheless, IP1 has mentioned, “I think it is perceived as ‘Oh look here, you’ve got (...) an e-car at the start’. But I don’t think it will have such a lasting effect and that it will have a positive impact on the image. Not yet!”.

4.2.2 Internal identity

Internally, sustainable practices impact the roles of experience marketing departments (IP3, IP4, IP6, IP7). IP3 has described the departments’ role with “We are now ambassadors for sustainability”. Similarly, IP6 highlighted the realization of the colleagues from other departments, that experience marketing must employ sustainable practices by saying “We are the ones who are experienced by the customer on site”. IP4 mentioned the impact of using digital tools on visibility and role within the company by saying, “...the metaverse events, VR events and VR experiences (...) these events in particular have positioned us as a marketing unit”. Meanwhile, IP7 limited the impression to specific departments explaining “...in the marketing context in any case and then also vis-à-vis the parties we deal with the most,

(...) However, I don’t want to say that we are now presenting a different picture for the company as a whole”.

4.3 Practice

The practice subchapter focuses on the sustainability actions experience marketing departments are undertaking. During the interview coding process three different categorisations for those actions got formed: events, sponsorships and general practices.

4.3.1 Events

Sustainable transportation initiatives are very popular with companies using sustainably friendly transportation vehicles (IP1, IP2, IP3). As example, IP3 mentioned efforts to provide sufficient charging infrastructures “to make it as easy as possible for guests to arrive with electric vehicles” while IP7 is carefully “considering what airline we use or what (...) we buy in terms of the ticketing”. Further, IP1, IP2 and IP5 stated that they are implementing most of the driving during the event with EVs.

The reduction of single-use plastics is another critical focus, with many interview partners (IP1, IP3, IP6, IP7) opting for alternatives to disposable cutlery, cups or bottles at an event.

Furthermore, the usage of a sustainable provider for resources and materials is a key aspect in sustainability in event management. IP2 noted the need for a sustainable energy source when charging EVs, saying, “when we’re charging our vehicles that we’re charging from a sustainable balanced source of electricity.” Similarly, IP7 mentioned “Do you use a diesel generator or do you use something sustainable that doesn’t harm the environment?”, where IP3 has said that “this is not comparable with fossil-fuelled generators in terms of cost...”. This topic of a sustainable provider gets extended by IP7 saying “Then we also look at clothing, what kind of fabrics are they, have they been produced sustainably (...) I also have to address the issue of child labour, which should also be avoided.”.

Consistent with this theme, there is a shift on wasting as little resources as possible (IP1, IP2, IP3, IP4, IP6, IP7). IP7 specifically mentioned the potential for saving resources in areas of lighting and electrical setups, stating “...light settings and electrics are also a big issue, and you can save a lot on them.”.

Local sourcing and hiring are another aspect which is central in experience marketing. Conscious efforts regarding the catering aspects of events are at the forefront of this (IP2, IP3, IP4, and IP5). By for instance, prioritising vegetarian options and ingredients from local regional producers, companies can minimize their environmental impact and support local communities. In line with the focus on local sourcing, IP6 emphasized the hiring of local personnel for their events whenever possible which reduces carbon emissions coming from travelling but also supports the local economy and community.

Further, the approach of selecting hotels for visitors, journalists, and clients has changed for some more luxury car manufacturer. Previously, the primary criterion was luxury, often prioritising it over sustainability. IP2 explained, “I would say we look sustainability first and the other criteria after that whereas before sustainability was a little bit further down the list of priorities”.

Additionally, efforts to reuse materials for constructing stages, booths, etc. are getting more important (IP3, IP6, IP7). IP3 stated they are using modular stand designs that allow for efficient repurposing across different events. She said, “We have modules in use, so-called pop-up modules, but also exhibition booths that we don’t just use once and then throw away (...) for almost 10 years now (...) The same also applies to the fact that we make the things we use for events available to the retail partners”. Similarly, IP7 mentioned a resource-saving strategy by their whole

group, involving a central storage facility. She said, *“in the exhibition centre warehouse, which is very large, we have extensive furniture, everything you need for events”*.

The integration of digital solutions in event management is initiating big changes in experience marketing within the automotive industry. IP1 and IP5 mentioned a change towards a paperless workflow, which significantly reduces waste at large-scale events. Additionally, VR technology is changing product presentations, as described by IP4 and IP6 have stated by allowing journalists, clients, etc. to experience the car and its functions without the need for multiple physical vehicles. Moreover, IP4 has also mentioned that they are offering the VR experience both at events and at home which saves travel to the event but also the build-up of the booths. They came up with this during the COVID-19 pandemic, so the sustainability was more of a consequence of their initial plan to maintain a certain experience of the product also in times of pandemic. Additionally, as IP1 and IP5 have said, through digitalization printed invites for events or brochures are not being used anymore, which can make a big difference, especially for events with thousands of attendees. Lastly, the digitalization has also, as in every other (white collar) job changed the way of communication since, as IP6 has mentioned, *“We work with many service providers, for example, we used to meet them once a week for a physical meeting, which is all digital of course”*.

To ensure that sustainability is part of the whole event management process, IP1, IP5, and IP7 have mentioned that they are implementing all the things previously mentioned in the tenders for agencies and partners from the beginning on to as IP1 said to *“...prioritise sustainability in the value chain...”*, which creates alignment among all individuals involved in the planning and preparation to have a joint effort towards more sustainability.

Projects in which something is being given back to the local communities where the event is happening is another way to improve the sustainability aspect in the practices. IP2 explained, *“I have an event (...) scheduled to run later this summer in Mykonos on the Greek island and (...) we investigate clear plastic from the beaches in Mykonos and ocean recovery of plastics. And that means that we come to Mykonos, we run our event, but we leave with having given something back to the local community”*.

Additionally, there is a strategic shift towards smaller events (IP2), which enhances personalization but also sustainability - so again the sustainability was the consequence of a different initial goal – and some companies are going away from being present at big auto shows such as the “Internationale Automobil-Ausstellung (IAA)” since they are being *“...a building burning strategy for most organisations where they build (...) a stand (...) for their products to be shown and at the end of the event, all that stuff gets thrown in the trash...”* and they *“...don't think that's where our clients want to see us...”*.

Another approach is to organise some events 100% CO₂-emission free - no matter the cost – to see what is possible, as mentioned by IP5.

Lastly, the attempt to scale sustainable practices to save money and also time developing new solutions has also been mentioned by IP6, saying *“...how can you use something that works just as well in the small market as it does in the large one?”*.

4.3.2 Sponsoring

Promoting sustainability also plays an important role in sponsorships. For instance, IP1 and IP3 have noted that they aim to support sports by providing electric vehicles, such as cars for towing trailers with sports equipment, instead of combustion vehicles, whenever feasible.

Additionally, initiatives at sponsored events, such as handing out awards for sustainable behaviour are extending sustainability to the participants of the event, as IP1 has stated.

4.3.3 General Practices

In general practices, companies are conducting regular sustainability audits across all activities (IP2, IP3, IP5). IP3 explained, *“...as part of the decision-making process, there is also a sustainability Key Performance Indicator, so when I organise an event or when we consider participating in sponsorships, we are also obliged to make a statement on (...) sustainability...”*.

Additionally, these audits are being extended to partners to ensure that they have the same environmental understanding, with IP2 saying, *“(...) it means that they must do sustainability assessments. So, they have to do some very thorough sustainability audits on potential partners...”*.

Furthermore, checklists help to ensure that environmental objectives are met, as IP7 has mentioned, *“We have set up a checklist (...) for every event we have, which consists of 30-40 points that also need to be maintained by the agency...”*.

4.4 Knowledge

In the knowledge subchapter the focus shifts to exploring the underlying knowledge basis to successfully drive this sustainability transition within experience marketing in the automotive industry. During the interview coding process and through the creation of the interview guide three major categories got explored: Type of knowledge and skills gaps, Difficulty to solve knowledge and skills gaps, and Solutions to close knowledge and skills gaps.

4.4.1 Type of knowledge and skills gaps

A common gap involves having specific knowledge about sustainability criteria, norms and compliance aspects concerning specific practices and certified events. (IP2, IP3, IP7). For instance, IP3 has said about this *“We have an event at which we are ISO-certified, and it was a particular challenge to understand a third party, this DIN methodology, in addition to the Group's measurement methodology...”*.

Additionally, a lack of awareness about the sources of CO₂ emissions coming from operations was also noted (IP1, IP3, IP5). IP5 said about the need for understanding emissions better, *“What effect does catering have on CO₂ production?”* or IP1 said, that at first you must *“...see where the sustainable use of resources is even possible.”* Furthermore, Challenges occur in understanding the new technologies since this sector is evolving rapidly which makes it hard to stay up to date on this (IP4, IP6). IP4 said about this *“...natural that not all the knowledge is available, especially with new technological developments, I think the sustainability field is very dynamic.”*

Contrary to this, transitioning to sustainable practices is not just about knowledge and skills but also about the general attitude of employees. IP2 mentions this by saying *“The shift to the new tasks was less about hard skills and more about prioritisation and mindset. (...) giving people a better insight into why things have to change and what's the objective of the change.”* Furthermore, IP4 has stated something similar, saying *“Awareness is there. What is particularly important in the area of knowledge is that there is certainly room for improvement, especially in the area of sensitisation in the use of materials...”*.

4.4.2 Difficulty to close knowledge and skills gaps

Closing the knowledge gaps seems not to be challenging (IP1, IP3, IP6, IP7). This can be due to the impact of external pressure, as IP6 has explained, *“I would say that the turbo has been switched on, forced by this pandemic, and there has been the time and the necessity to deal with it”*. Similarly, IP7 has mentioned the financial investments by noting *“...we have to pay money for*

training outside our company, it's a rocky road for us, but we all didn't resist (...) because it corresponds to our company philosophy, and that's why it was actually okay... ”.

Contrastingly, difficulties in learning the required knowledge have been reported (IP2, IP5). IP2 raised concerns about employee's priorities by saying “...whilst people understood the reason why it had to happen, pushing sustainability up the list of priorities means that other things have to come down the list of priorities and that's the point where people get a little bit sensitive... ”. Additionally, IP5 mentioned the scarcity of information, “All this knowledge was simply not available, and I mean, it's not something that you can easily find on the internet”.

4.4.3 Approaches to close knowledge and skills gaps

Different ways have been used to tackle the knowledge issue based on their organisational resources. Internally as well as externally, organisations made use of trainings (mandatory and non-mandatory) available across the group (IP1, IP2, IP3, IP7). These trainings which include web-based trainings (WBT), personal appointments or group workshops were offered in mandatory and optional formats. IP7 said, “We have to pay money for training outside of our company, it's a rocky road for us, but we didn't resist, that's what we want to do”. Nevertheless, she also said later in the interview, “In other words, it is important for me to see where the difference in budget is, but also to argue with the finance department. And you know, we don't have easy times right now, but that's still the way to go.”.

Additionally, organisations are increasing their knowledge by collaborating with agencies and consultancies, with IP5 mentioning the work with a sustainability consultancy, “We also work together with a central sustainability consultancy, which simply helps us, analyses our events and says ok, what can we do there, and also suggests concepts to all of us as to what we can now really do in terms of CO2 reduction measures... ”.

Next to external support, companies are creating experts or expert groups that actively try to enhance the knowledge base (IP5, IP7). For instance, IP7 explained that they have one specific person as an expert as part of the department, responsible since 2019 for building up knowledge and overseeing the sustainability in their practices. Similar to that, IP5 has mentioned the creation of a company-wide expert group, by saying, “We have (...) set up a company-wide group of experts with employees from all areas who are involved in the topic of sustainability and who also share best practices on what works and what doesn't work. And then the respective person responsible also takes this back to the respective area.”.

Organisations also started the practice of organising a sustainability day yearly or biyearly to update everyone in the department or organisation as well as do workshops (IP3, IP7). Moreover, IP6 has mentioned the unexpected benefit of the COVID-19 pandemic that has helped them to accumulate knowledge, saying “...through this pandemic (...) there was the time and the need to deal with it... ”.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpretation

The findings of this study create a comprehensive overview of the different domains identity, practice and knowledge within the field of experience marketing in the automotive industry. The usage of the three dimensions shows the multidimensional challenges companies are facing when aiming to become more sustainable in their actions.

This section interprets the results previously described by explaining the empirical data to offer a deeper insight into the current situation within the field to then present incongruences within the domains identity, practice and knowledge.

5.1.1 Identity

The identity of a company plays an important role in how sustainable practices are being perceived internally as well as externally. This subchapter is focusing on the impacts of sustainable practices on identity and the challenges companies are facing when their identity is possibly changing towards a more sustainable one.

Within the companies interviewed, sustainable practices have become more important in changing a organisations identity (Frostenson et al., 2022) and is seen as a key factor of a successful business, particularly in experience marketing where there is a direct interaction with the customers (Bowdin et al., 2023). Most companies are saying that improving the sustainability in their practices has positively influenced their external perceptions which is showing a positive development towards corporate responsibility. However, challenges exist especially for companies historically focused on high-performance vehicles, as for instance for one of the participants, even though their change is being recognised, their overall identity has still not changed. Additionally, balancing the authentic implementation of sustainable practices with expected standards showcase another challenge, especially when luxury has played a more important role in the past. Furthermore, even though more sustainability is often appreciated by the customers there might be some doubt about the authenticity of the company's identity, partly due to the automotive industry's historical pollution issues.

From the perspective of the interviewed companies, the change of the external identity towards a more sustainable one, is further being challenged by the increasingly popular question about the real sustainable value of EVs. This question is something which will become clearer soon and could have a significant effect on the overall external opinion about sustainability in the automotive industry.

Internally, according to the interviewees the transformation towards more sustainable practices has also started to redesign the positions and expectations with departments such as experience marketing becoming the ambassadors for sustainability which shows the internal appreciation for rolling out more sustainable practices. However, changing the identity of the experience marketing department to a more sustainable one can be challenging to a certain degree. While nearby departments, as example within the marketing & sales division, might see a change, this does not necessarily mean a shift in identity throughout the whole organisation. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that this often might be influenced by the large size of the company.

5.1.2 Practice

Throughout the seven interviews 18 different approaches to employ more sustainable practices got identified, categorized into events sponsorships and general practices. Some actions were only implemented by single participants, where other actions have been executed by all companies.

For events, key practices include the usage of electric vehicles for transportation cases such as shuttle services and travel to the events. Ensuring the necessary charging infrastructure supports the adoption of these vehicles, to tackle challenges such as a comparably low range of electric vehicles cars or insufficient charging infrastructure at the venues, which can hinder users to take them for long distance travels. Solving these issues can cause big logistical as well financial consequences for the organising company.

Efforts to reduce non-biodegradable materials, with companies eliminating single-use plastics like cutlery, cups and bottles, are becoming more important. However, finding good sustainable alternatives that have the same or similar practicality often come with an increased price, which often involves trade-offs between sustainability, financial regards and convenience.

Within the interviews, responsible sourcing of materials emerged as another focus, ensuring that things like electricity for charging electric vehicles and other technologies are gathered from a sustainable source. Having to balance out sustainability with practicality is challenging, especially when choosing between options like electric heating powered by sustainable electricity over diesel generators, since this requires evaluation of cost, effectiveness and sustainability.

Another priority identified is the minimization of resource wastage during events which involves things such as lighting, electrical setups or food. By doing so, the companies can decrease their environmental footprint but also cut off costs which shows another good approach to mitigate negative effects on sustainability while experiencing financial benefits.

Another shift among the interviewees is the implementation of sustainability in catering regards, with companies choosing local sources for food and offering more environmentally friendly dishes. Pushing vegetarian food options and locally sourced food comes with the benefits of decreasing the carbon footprint coming from the processing meat and transportation. However, challenges include the limited availability of local products, especially seasonal products, and meeting the expectations from the more traditional attendees.

Hiring of local staff for events is another practice which is resulting in avoiding emissions coming from long-distance travel but also in the economic support of local communities. The challenge here lies on the availability of skilled labour, which can result in extra expenses for trainings.

Among participants coming from the luxury segment, the trend towards ranking sustainability over high expectations of customers appears. This development shows a broader industry wide change towards more sustainability among all different kind of companies, even though resistance to change established standards exists. For instance, choosing hotels with sustainability credentials can come with a higher price and the risk that these hotels are truly sustainably better. This can be hard to overcome considering the short time frames of most events which force companies to act very quick and spontaneous.

Looking at the booth building for events, two key practices employed by the interviewees are the usage of modular and reusable designs as well as building up central storage facilities. The shift from building new booths for each event to using modular designs not only reducing waste but also decreases the demand for new materials. Central storage allows the storing and reuse of event items, which is further decreasing waste and costs. Despite the positive effects, there are still some issues implementing the plans, such as standardising event materials so they can be reused for different car models or colour even brands within one group.

Study findings show a shift towards more and more implementing digital solution in their experience marketing to minimise environmental impact and enhance communication. Going paperless internally as well as externally reduces the paper waste a lot. On the external side, replacing physical by digital invites for events has a high impact considering the huge amounts of attendees. The use of technologies such as VR is enabling journalists, clients, etc. to experience products. It allows for an increasingly immersive presentation of the product without the need for multiple products on site, which decreases logistical challenges

and costs from transporting the products. Further, the digital streaming of different things such as meetings but also product presentations, pushed especially by COVID-19 pandemic, reduces the need to travel to every event, which saves emissions. The use case of AR/VR as well as livestreaming aligns with insights discussed in the literature review (Henriques & Winkler; Yang, 2023).

Additionally, within the sample it became common to include environmental criteria into the procurement and planning stage. This includes implementing requirements into tenders for partners and agencies which creates consistency in sustainability practices among the whole value chain. While the approach can be very effective, it can be challenging to monitoring and control third parties, which is coming with higher costs.

In the research sample, involvement in local environmental events has become more usual. By not only organising an event as environmentally friendly as possible but actively contributing to local communities by partnering up with local organisations to support environmental conservation, such as beach cleanups, plastic recovering from oceans, a social side is added to sustainability efforts.

Participants are shifting towards smaller events to increase personalisation, companies can better plan and therefore further reduce waste of resources. Nevertheless, this approach comes with the challenge of reaching a large audience and therefore might result in a negative impact on visibility and reach.

Another more strategic change within the interviewees companies is the attempt to scale certain practices to other markets. This best practice-sharing helps to internationalise effective approaches which saves time and reduces trial and error of other sustainability solutions. However, adapting strategies to meet different market requirements, can require flexibility.

Also in sponsorships, a common practice among participants is the usage of electric vehicles for sport events is supporting eco-friendly mobility and enhances green identities. For instance, electric vehicles are being used to tow trailers with sport equipment for events, while subtly promoting the technological capabilities of the vehicle. This practice faces challenges such as an insufficient charging infrastructure which is often not existing e.g. at certain sport events which are happening nowhere nearby any bigger city (Deb et al., 2018), and range limitations of current electric vehicles (Haustein & Jensen, 2018). The topic of the range challenge aligns with prior research discussed in the literature review (Andwari et al., 2017). Further, companies are adding sustainable agreements into sponsorship contracts to ensure that sponsored events are aligned with their sustainability agenda. This is binding the partner to minimize the environmental footprint and promote sustainable behaviour among the event participants, e.g. by incentivising them with awards. Even though this offers the chance to not only improve the events sustainability and the sponsor's brand identity, it also comes with challenges, such as ensuring that partners and sponsored entities are meeting the sustainability standards. This poses the risk of negative associations with the sponsoring brand if the partners cannot meet sustainability objectives.

Next to the events and sponsorships area, as some more general practices, regular audits of partners as well as assessments of the events ensure that the whole event is conforming to sustainability standards. These audits and assessments help improving processes to reach the goal of zero emissions.

5.1.3 Knowledge

Based on the data, realizing what specific effects certain actions have on the overall environmental footprint can make it hard to improve sustainability. Further, there is a lack of understanding

criteria and standards, environmental regulations and certifications such as the ISO, which must be met. Additionally, lacking up to date knowledge about latest technologies could hinder the companies to adopt innovative ways of decreasing the carbon footprint of marketing events further.

The findings also indicated that organising (external) education and trainings are important to keep all employees up to date with the newest and most important standards, certifications and regulations. Nevertheless, those trainings are often confronted with big budget constraints due to the current economic situation (Cârstea, 2023). Another challenge is the resistance to change within organisations, especially regarding moving down other priorities to move up sustainability topics on the priority list. Further, the scarcity of info materials about sustainability topics relevant to experience marketing is a problem. Moreover, finding solutions which can easily be implemented without extensive investments often is an issue.

5.1.4 *Incongruences between knowledge and practice*

The biggest gaps in incongruences have been identified between the organisational knowledge available internally and practical actions. This misalignment particularly exists in financial matters, where there is uncertainty about the economic viability of investments in sustainability. Those investments are often coming with high spendings, especially finance departments are often not sure about the short-term returns on these investments. This showcases a gap between understanding the importance of sustainability and committing the necessary resources to implement actions.

Additionally, the prioritisation of experience marketing activities is another challenge. These activities which are characterised by their short-term focus and high time pressure, often limit the sustainable implementation. The need to act quick in experience marketing, drive down the prioritisation of environmentally friendly activities, which, while beneficial in the long run, do not directly contribute to (short-term) marketing metrics, meaning there is a gap between the knowledge and prioritisation.

Furthermore, there have been increasing discussions about the real sustainable value of automotive products, such as EVs. This is influencing the discussions about sustainability activities and presents a gap between the practice and the market development.

Lastly, the digital transformation in experience marketing also created an important gap between the knowledge and digitalisation. Initially started through the COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of digital solutions that come with sustainable benefits came much later than needed. Due to this delay, a big lack of knowledge about new technologies occurred, causing employees to face problems in using them.

5.1.5 *Incongruences between knowledge and identity*

The identity-knowledge incongruences that have been identified in the interviews are fewer and mainly differ regarding their internal vs. external perspective. For the external identity there are significant uncertainties concerning the credibility of sustainable activities. Despite internal knowledge and promotion of environmentally friendly actions, there is doubt about the positive impact of those, especially in segments like sportscars and luxury vehicles where performance and luxury have traditionally been more ranked higher than sustainability. This happens to be a gap between the actual (environmentally friendly) practices and the biased external identity.

On the side of the internal identity, there is a gap between the organisational understanding of sustainability and how it is perceived across different divisions. Experience marketing, as a front-end department, has the potential to take over a leading role in the movement towards a sustainable identity.

5.1.6 *Incongruences between identity and practice*

Opposing to initial assumptions, the interviews did not show any big incongruences between the companies' identities as a green and sustainable organisations and their actual practices. Interviewees stated that there is a complete alignment between the companies' sustainable values and identity and their actual practices. Anyhow slight incongruences have been identified.

First, it has been stated that goals to employ more sustainable practices conflict with business aspects. The cost of e.g. using more environmentally friendly materials challenge the implementation, especially when the direct effect is not that obvious.

Additionally, there are doubts about the effects of internal changes in practices on the external identity. Companies are questioning whether the internal sustainability efforts effectively improve the companies market position regarding sustainability.

5.2 Implications

The research on sustainability in experience marketing within the automotive industry contributes to both theoretical and practical knowledge. From a theoretical perspective, the thesis broadens the IPK framework - that is initially focusing on areas like production or logistics - by applying it specifically to the challenges of sustainability in experience marketing. With this approach it researches a rarely investigated area, as sustainability in experience marketing has not been a topic in academic regards so far.

Incongruences	Possible solutions
Knowledge and practice	
Knowledge vs. execution cost	Studies regarding effects of sustainability activities on business results/ cases
Knowledge vs. prioritisation	Binding objectives and targets for sustainability measures in experience marketing
Practice vs. market development	Long time positioning of EV focus within experience marketing strategy if in line with company strategy
Knowledge vs. digitalisation	Development and approval of explicit digitalisation strategy and experience marketing tool kit
Knowledge and identity	
External identity	Specific and consistent long-term sustainability strategy for all product segments
Internal identity	Marketing departments proactively taking lead in developing and presenting overarching sustainability strategies
Identity and practice	
Identity vs. cost of execution	Studies regarding impact of sustainability activities on image-based business results
External relevance of internal measures	Concept for external communication of internal sustainability activities and measurement of results (e.g. in social media)

Table 1: Solutions to overcome challenges

Practically, the study offers valuable insights for professionals, not only from the automotive industry, as it provides them with hands on insights into how (automotive) companies can implement sustainable practices into their strategies and operations more effectively. The detailed description of which practices different companies are employing, as well as how they overcome certain challenges, provides a good source for inspiration for similar approaches across the industry.

The incongruences that have been identified represent major barriers for a consistent approach to sustainability of experience marketing in the automotive industry. Therefore, they must be addressed by specific actions to be solved properly, as described in the table above.

5.3 Limitations & Recommendations

Despite the studies insights, there are certain limitations which future scholars could try to tackle to further improve the research.

First, future researchers could profit from adopting a wider demographic participant base from more parts of the world, including different levels of interviewees, e.g. from manufacturer, importer and dealer level. Also, customers from different target groups could be included in future studies to reach a better understanding of internal vs. external perspectives. Further longitudinal studies could be very helpful in analysing the progress regarding strategies and general adoption of this topic over time and in more in depth.

Further, also considering not only qualitative but also quantitative studies could help to statistically validate the findings, e.g. by diving deeper into the actual effectiveness of the discussed practices, but also employ comparisons between different clusters within the automotive industry, e.g. comparison of companies with different customer target groups, from different global regions, different segments or different sizes. Finally, also the comparison with experience marketing activities from other industry could add additional benefit.

All together, these recommendations aim at facilitating deeper insights and findings for professionals as well as academics while continuously enhancing the research using this framework.

5.4 Conclusion

This thesis aims at exploring the complex interrelationships among identity, practice, and knowledge within experience marketing in the automotive industry. The primary research question for this study is:

"What are the key incongruences among identity, practice, and knowledge in the realm of sustainable experience marketing in the automotive industry, and what are possible ways of overcoming these challenges?"

Based on a qualitative analysis including seven interviews with professionals from various major automotive manufacturers, the study unveiled different approaches of how companies are going towards more sustainability. Based on this, different incongruences between the domains identity, practice and knowledge have been identified, which showcases specific challenges,

The outcomes of this research provide valuable insights into how experience marketing departments within automotive companies are navigating through sustainability transitions and proposes possible solutions to certain difficulties, which future academic scholars can base on.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A – Interview Guide

1. General information
How long have you been with the organisation?
What is your job title?
Which specific tasks in the department of experience marketing do you currently do?
What does the organisation do? What is the core business? Who are the main customers?
2. The current change situation
How would you describe the current situation of the organisation regarding change in experience marketing towards more sustainability?
What has been done in this context, what do you still have ahead of you?
What are the major changes in your organisation that you see in relation to this?
3. Changes in work practices
How have these changes affected the company's operations?
What are the concrete things that the organisation must do differently as a consequence of these changes?
Have your own work practices changed due to these changes? In what way?
How have these changes influenced your daily work routine or responsibilities?
4. Impact on knowledge and skills
Does/did the organisation have the necessary skills to perform these new tasks?
What exactly did the organisation have to learn?
Who had to acquire new knowledge or skills, and which knowledge and skills?
If so: Was it difficult for the organisation to acquire these skills?
Were there any new skills or knowledge areas you needed to acquire yourself?
Did you find it challenging to acquire these new skills?
5. Image of the organisation
Do you believe these changes have influenced the organisation's image, particularly regarding its commitment to sustainability?
How has your own professional role (as an xxx) evolved in the light of these changes?
Has it altered your perception of your role within the organization?
6. Challenges faced
What were the most significant challenges encountered during this transition?
Specifically, what challenges arose at the intersection of the three areas, practice, knowledge and identity for the organisation as a whole?
And were there challenges for yourself?
7. Reactions and answers
How did your organisation deal with these challenges? How did you overcome the problems?
8. Learnings
What are your learnings from these experiences regarding organisational change in the context of sustainability?
What would you recommend to other organisations who are facing similar changes? How should they approach them?
9. Other information
Have we overlooked any question or information that you would like to mention?

Appendix B – Participants Table

	Tenure	Gender	Company employees	Vehicle segment	Function/ Title
IP1	>7 years	Male	>30,000, large	Volume	Head of Marketing
IP2	<1 year	Male	>30,000, large	Upper class	Director Brand Delivery
IP3	<3 years	Male	>80,000, large	Volume/Upper Class	Head of Customer Experience
IP4	<1 year	Male	>10,000, large	Volume	Head of Marketing
IP5	>2 years	Male	>40,000, large	Sports cars	Marketing Manager / Responsible Employee Sustainability Experiential
IP6	>1 year	Female	>90,000, large	Upper class	Manager Experiential Marketing
IP7	>3 year	Female	>200,000, large	Volume	Head of Experience Marketing