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Sovereign brands' contribution to corporate durability objectives: proposed definitions and operating methods

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SUMMARY

In a series of exploratory propositions, this research article argues the thesis that sovereign brands make a positive contribution to corporate CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) goals. While sovereignty is commonly associated with national selfishness in the collective unconscious, CSR is linked to positive, virtuous, and transnational values. After carefully defining the sovereign brand and its mode of operation, we demonstrate that it contributes to harmonious development, protects social rights, and aligns with sustainable development goals when operating within the eco-development framework.

KEYWORDS

CSR, brand, dependence, sovereignty, economy, sustainable development.

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INTRODUCTION

Economic sovereignty is commonly assumed to be difficult to reconcile with social and environmental concerns. Therefore, the concept of a sovereign brand may unconsciously evoke notions of national selfishness in the consumer's mind (Agarwal, 2014). In contrast, a CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) brand is more likely associated with positive, virtuous, and transnational values (Vogel, 2006), a perception mediated by felt gratitude and moderated by the magnitude of altruistic values held by consumers (Romani et alii, 2013). Our article takes the opposite stance by addressing a fundamental question: how can a brand, as the spokesperson (and guarantor) of an economic actor, adopt a responsible attitude toward the environment or its customers if its political, strategic, or economic dependencies prevent it from exercising this responsibility? Ultimately, the question posed is one of purposes: a brand must be economically sovereign to claim to promote ethically and environmentally responsible behaviors in line with the values and desires of its customers. Conversely, how can a brand promote these behaviors if its destiny is not in its hands but remains dependent on decisions made elsewhere regarding sourcing, production, technical choices, or marketing decisions? Numerous examples abound, exacerbated by the COVID-19 health crises (masks, medicines, etc.) or recent international tensions in Ukraine (inflation of food brands, raw material shortages, rising energy costs, etc.). This article argues that brands that genuinely and wholeheartedly engage in a Corporate Social

Responsibility (CSR) policy cannot escape the need to be economically sovereign because responsibility cannot exist without sovereignty.

As a result of the health and economic crises, consumers are increasingly giving importance to the dependency criteria of a brand . Dependency creates constraints that deprive the brand of its ability to fulfill its CSR commitments, especially in terms of sustainability (Lins & alii, 2017), as illustrated by the resurgence of carbon-intensive electricity production in Europe since the war in Ukraine. A brand that does not control its value chain or is unable to reconfigure it faces threats to its sustainability, which consumers are increasingly aware of today (shortages of masks, medicines, energy, rampant inflation, etc.). This is precisely the *raison d'être* of a sovereign brand: to reduce dependency factors.

After defining the concept of a sovereign brand, we will demonstrate its role as an innovative lever for an ambitious CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) strategy. The embodiment of CSR through economic sovereignty enhances the legitimacy of brands in various areas of intervention, such as social justice, regional development, and environmental preservation, thus contributing to sustainable development. Our article positions itself upstream of confirmatory research on the subject. Therefore, we will approach the impact of the sovereign brand on CSR from the perspective of research proposals rather than hypotheses, as our approach falls within an exploratory framework.

THE SOVEREIGN BRAND: A DEFINITION PROPOSAL

The sovereign brand is the opposite of the dependent brand.

At the microeconomic level, economic dependence, the antonym of economic sovereignty, is defined as "the impossibility for a company to have a technically and economically equivalent

solution to the contractual relationships it has established with another company" (Haas & Renaud-Chouraqui, 2021). A brand is in a state of dependence when three conditions are met under Article L402-2 of the Commercial Code: there is a situation of dependence, a third-party brand unduly benefits from this situation, and this situation affects the functioning or competitive structure of a given market (DGCRF, 2021). The issue of dependence among competitors is subject to debate, as is its use by competition authorities (Marty and Reis, 2013). Dependency between brands is not inherently problematic. However, it becomes problematic when its value in its market is not substitutable in the short and medium term.

Beyond the legal definition, the notion of the brand's strategic destiny is at stake. The concept of sovereignty, whether applied to a brand or a state, always refers to the capacity for action and, for the company, to its ability to fulfill its mission and its vision. Suppose an organization's mission indeed helps define its identity and core business. In that case, the vision provides the company with the opportunity to reflect on what it aspires to become (Whittington et al., 2023). The strategic fate of a company thus lies in its ability to formulate a mission that can realize its vision in the medium and long term. However, this is only possible if the company manages to mobilize a set of resources that allows it to define and evolve its business and adapt to inherently dynamic environments while avoiding the pitfalls of dependency. Any strategy requires preserving a specific capacity for action, determined at a given time by possessing specific resources. These resources may vary over time and only sometimes lead to the so-called dynamic capabilities in the medium and long term, as revealed by Teece and Pisano in 1994. The strategy's essence lies primarily in preserving one's flexibility. When Freedman (2017) states that strategy is the art of creating power, he precisely refers to this idea. Power is not limited to the concept of domination but refers to a capability: the ability to avoid dependence and thus maintain freedom of action. Faced with stakeholders where conflict is always possible, companies must remain independent. Strategy, therefore, involves addressing the diverse

demands of these stakeholders while pursuing their strategic objectives. This requires ongoing negotiations, which should maintain the company's fundamental identity and its long-term vision. In these negotiations, a strong brand is undoubtedly a significant asset for the company, and its independence is a prerequisite.

The strategic renewal for a sovereign brand in a changing environment.

Every brand operates in a competitive environment, confronted with other brands, whether they belong to identical or substitutable product categories. From this perspective, and by drawing an analogy with military strategy, we find what General Beaufre (1963) called a "struggle of wills." He emphasized that "the struggle of wills boils down to a struggle for freedom of action (...) the fight for freedom of action is, therefore, the essence of strategy," not only in the military but also in the economic realm. By analogy, marketing strategy unfolds within interdependence, where companies rely on each other at various value chain stages. This degree of interdependence naturally varies depending on the competitive context and requires the company to be able to negotiate with different stakeholders. The objective is to capture resources useful for achieving its strategic goals and reduce the constraints imposed by its environment by managing dependency dynamics in a way that favors its interests. As Pfeffer (1992, p. 39) underlines it rightly: "*When interdependence exists, our ability to get things done requires us to develop power and the capacity to influence those on whom we depend*". In this power dynamic, the ability to act will depend, among other factors, on the actor's "centrality" within a given network (Cook et al., 1983). Therefore, a sovereign brand must necessarily occupy or assert a central position in its competitive environment.

Faced with numerous challenges, including environmental ones that threaten their very survival, brands must assert their sovereignty, that is, they must develop the resources necessary to ensure their adaptation to these new constraints. As Barney (1991) reminded us, a resource

is only strategic if it enables the exploitation of an opportunity or the mitigation of a threat. From this perspective, the new environmental challenges represent both opportunities and threats. Koenig (2004) prefers to use the terms projects and problem-solving rather than opportunities and threats, which refer too much to the SWOT model. This choice of vocabulary is not neutral, as the terms "projects" and "problem-solving" refer to an action-oriented dynamic typical of business strategies. Along the same lines, Barney (1991) is right, in our view, to emphasize that any strategic resource is directed towards an operational goal. Suppose the objective is specifically to reduce dependency phenomena. In that case, companies are naturally encouraged to continuously renew their strategic capabilities in a constantly changing environment by leveraging the previously identified opportunities. In a more defensive approach, the company can focus on reducing an identified threat that would eventually limit its room for maneuver.

The concentration of suppliers in certain strategic sectors, such as healthcare, energy, transportation, and food, clearly poses a threat to companies' sovereignty and, by extension, the sustainability of their brands. Any increase in transfer costs or disruption of the supply chain could jeopardize these companies' entire long-term strategic outlook. This is evident in the automotive industry, where the transition to fully electric vehicles is making manufacturers increasingly dependent on certain Chinese companies that supply batteries, components, and essential raw materials for production. Similarly, for Chinese companies, the recent U.S. policy of restricting the export of certain microprocessors and associated operating systems has significantly limited their room for maneuver, as seen in the case of Huawei. This reduction in their operational capabilities threatens their strategic future, prompting Huawei to adopt a new strategy aimed at replacing American technology inputs with Chinese technological solutions.

In both cases, it becomes clear that the level of dependence and the inability of companies to renew themselves, as noted by Burgelman (1994), can lead to strategic paralysis. This dependence can also be analyzed from a geographical perspective. For instance, French luxury companies are heavily reliant on the growth of the Chinese market, which is closely tied to the country's economic development. Will they continue their growth if Chinese authorities, faced with the threat of an economic slowdown, choose to prioritize other sectors over luxury, which imported foreign brands primarily dominate? Wouldn't their strategic trajectory then be dependent on the decisions of Chinese leaders?

However, as we will see, more than this adaptation is needed, as a company's strategic destiny involves more than merely preserving its freedom of action. It aims to enable the company to achieve its true purpose. Moreover, this needs to be more emphasized: the new challenges frequently require companies to redefine their identity. Corporate social responsibility policies act as catalysts, accelerating the reconfiguration of a company's mission and, more profoundly, its identity and culture.

Sovereign brand: a proposed definition

As rightly emphasized by Keohane and Nye (1987) in an article dedicated to a critical review of their work "Power and Interdependence" (1977), interdependence is a characteristic of the contemporary world. The authors highlight that one of the features of modern economies is the complexity and depth of economic relations between states, which undermine the power of states and, conversely, strengthen the power of non-state actors, be they sub-national, national, or transnational. Global brands are among these transnational non-state actors, especially the GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft), or "tech giants" in the technology and digital realm.

Our concept of the sovereign brand does not aim to extract brands from the interdependent relationships inherent in markets within a liberal economy: no brand in any market can claim self-sufficiency today, an economic regime characterized by a lack of exchanges. The sovereign brand would, therefore, exist between these two extremes: total dependence on one side and complete autarky on the other, in a continuum between deemed unacceptable submission and unrealistic absolute independence (Mainwaring, 1979).

From a marketing perspective, and by analogy with the definition of state sovereignty (Vie publique, 2019), we formulate the following proposition:

[P1] - A brand is sovereign if it has the capacity to make commitments and uphold them without relying on others and by organizing itself freely.

This definition encompasses the two inherent principles of sovereignty: non-interference and freedom of choice. However, we accept that a strong brand is only valuable through its ability to defend a substantial, differentiating, and sustainable competitive advantage expressed in its positioning (Porter, 2023). In that case, economic sovereignty is an indispensable prerequisite for a solid and enduring brand.

However, the sovereign brand does not embrace autarky, a regime of self-sufficiency characterized by a lack of exchanges (Plesia, 1937). The sovereign brand also does not align with the rejection of interdependencies, which characterize relationships among brands in a globalized world (Kuenne, 1992; Leontief, 1986), defined by Boulanger (1953) as "solidarity ties" among different sectors of an economy. In this regard, the sovereign brand positions its development within a delicate balance between "the ability to act autonomously when necessary and with partners whenever possible," akin to the concept of strategic autonomy advocated by the European Council (2016). However, it is essential to note that the sovereign and autonomous

brands are not synonymous, as autonomy is the prerequisite for sovereignty, defined as the rejection of harmful forms of dependency and subjugation.

The sovereign brand preserves economic players' ability to act

Regardless of the chosen term, be it "sovereign brand" or "autonomous brand," the need for freedom of choice to act in one's best interests is always present. Therefore, a brand's sovereignty serves only one purpose: preserving its ability to act to implement its strategy. As perfectly articulated by Desportes (2018), "the art of thinking about action is only of interest if it is free to be implemented." For a brand, the greater the freedom to act, the greater the leeway to execute its strategy. On a microeconomic level, a brand's "reserves" encompass all the human, technological, industrial, financial, and other resources it can mobilize in each competitive context to "maneuver" while maintaining its freedom of action. In a context of strong dependence, the only strategy available to a brand is a reactive stance. However, in a world characterized by profound and rapid disruptions on many fronts—demographic, climatic, economic, technological, and so on—a mere reactive stance is insufficient; proactivity must be pursued. This is precisely the interpretation of the Economic Sovereignty Barometer conducted by the Vélite firm (2022). The ranking index developed includes three dimensions based on the adopted strategy's offensive, defensive, and contributive orientation and actions taken. Ultimately, regardless of the dimensions considered, the main question facing the company, and by extension the brands it markets, is its ability to fulfill its strategic destiny, with a perspective that is necessarily medium- or long-term.

Therefore, we propose the following:

[P2]- The sovereign brand's purpose is to preserve a company's ability to implement its own strategy while having the necessary leeway to carry it out.

As we have discussed, a sovereign brand is able to integrate into contexts of interdependence without losing its freedom of action, enabling it to fulfill and assume its mission. This capability requires renewing its resource base in response to environmental challenges. Therefore, a sovereign brand is inevitably concerned with developing dynamic capabilities, which alone can ensure long-term adaptation and even the development of proactive strategies (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000), all with the singular objective of enhancing sustainable performance (Teece, 2007).

The alignment between a company's mission (vision) and the development of dynamic capabilities thus becomes the key to preserving its freedom of action. This alignment requires two things: first, a clear assessment of the environmental challenges and their impact on the brand's stock of resources and competencies, and second, the brand's ability to reconfigure its resources and competencies to ensure the long-term sustainability of its mission (Helfat and Peteraf, 2003; Ambrosini and alii., 2009). This necessary reconfiguration of resources requires the deployment of dynamic capabilities. In this context, innovation plays a vital role, a role that has been consistently highlighted when acting for environmental protection. Porter and Van der Linde's research (1995) provides an example of resource reconfiguration. The authors reveal how, under the influence of constraints and challenges, companies in various industries have changed their ways of operating to adapt to new constraints while preserving their resources—a challenge that is, of course, even more difficult for the fossil fuel sector. Porter and Van der Linde demonstrate that, in the context of increased regulatory constraints regarding corporate social responsibility (CSR), entrepreneurial success relies on an optimal balance between two essential strategic capacities: adapting to a changing environment and implementing a differentiation strategy.

A brand lives only through its mission and ability to affirm its vision over time. This affirmation requires mobilizing all resources that will enable the brand to make its mission credible and its vision achievable, that is, to make it operational for its stakeholders. A sovereign brand is, therefore, one that succeeds in rallying its stakeholders around the promises of its mission and its vision (Freeman, 1994). However, a company's mission requires more than fulfilling it. Indeed, a company's mission requires its integration into the environment so that it can achieve its aims by considering what it knows how to do (internal factors) and what the competitive context allows it to do (external factors) (Porter, 1996).

The strategic destiny goes beyond the mission; it is not merely about satisfying specific demands of the environment, but more fundamentally about realizing through various actions what the company truly is—its core identity, which fundamentally relates to its value system. The success of a company should therefore also be measured by its ability to fulfill its strategic destiny, which involves mobilizing resources at a given time that enable it to integrate not only its offerings into the environment but also the values embedded within its organization that form its identity. The alignment between the offering and the company's values thus becomes the key to its strategic destiny, as the company must also project its identity through its offerings. To summarize, the offering strategy must be embedded within the overall strategy. In this regard, the brand, as a synthesis of the company's actions, plays a fundamental role (Hatch and Schultz, 2003). This embedding exercise is not easy, and Danone's example shows that a company cannot merely rely on statements about its values; those values must also be embodied in its product and service offerings and meet strong customer expectations. Failing that, the firm risks severe repercussions from shareholders and investment funds. Stakeholders, by definition and by nature, are characterized by their diversity, which entails often differentiated expectations and needs. For the company, this sometimes results in a tricky balance to achieve between, on the one hand, its own identity and objectives and, on the other

hand, the varied expectations of these stakeholders. For instance, while consumers have become more sensitive to environmental and climate issues, they are also constrained by their purchasing power and tend to seek the lowest price. Therefore, expectations can be divergent within a single stakeholder group. As a result, the traditional dichotomy between cost leadership and differentiation strategies has become obsolete. A brand can only truly assert its sovereignty if it succeeds in reconciling, with agility and flexibility, expectations that are sometimes conflicting.

A sovereign brand is therefore necessarily an agile brand (Denning, 2018), and it is also one that is more focused on its core identity than on its specific business. It is the brand's identity that ultimately ensures the firm's survival, not always its business, as the latter evolves with technological changes. The business itself results from a particular configuration of resources at a given time. However, it is the nature of dynamic resources to reconfigure themselves, allowing the company to move into new lines of business. Agility should not be confused with a mere ability to adapt to the challenges of a changing environment, which could be termed functional flexibility. It is indeed about adapting without abandoning one's purpose or core identity.

[P3]- A sovereign brand successfully develops its dynamic capabilities over time to fulfill its strategic destiny. This means reconciling the expectations it aims to meet with the values it intends to embody.

THE SOVEREIGN BRAND CONTRIBUTES TO CSR OBJECTIVE

The sovereign brand contributes to harmonious development

The approach of the French government drew inspiration relatively late, in 2014 and then in 2018, from the American Foreign Investment and National Security Act (2007) to define a set

of sectors whose strategic assets must be protected from external interference: defense, security, energy, water, transportation, electronic communications, healthcare, and digital technologies.

The definition of what is strategic and what is not has continued to pose a problem since then because it should not be subject to the arbitrariness of successive ministries. We propose a simple definition: a sector is strategic when its mastery is necessary to ensure harmonious economic, social, and environmental development.

By "harmonious development," we mean an actor's capacity, whether public or private, to achieve objectives beyond purely economic purposes and encompass social justice and environmental preservation issues. Our definition of "harmonious development" aligns well with the framework of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) advocated by Elkington (1994), in which a company should be "economically viable, socially responsible, and environmentally sound," and more broadly within the framework of corporate social responsibility (CSR) adopted by the European Commission (2011), which addresses "the responsibility of companies for the impact they have on society." Therefore, we propose the following:

[P4] - The sovereign brand contributes to preserving strategic sectors whose mastery is necessary to ensure harmonious economic, social, and environmental development.

The sovereign brand protects social rights

Karl Polanyi (1944), in his seminal work "The Great Transformation", underscored a critical shift in market dynamics during the 19th century: in a capitalist economy, the economy ceases to be embedded in social relations; instead, social relations become subsumed within the economic system. His assertion that "a market economy can only function within a market society" encapsulates this transition. Society becomes an extension of the market by commodifying essential elements such as land, labor, and money. Polanyi's analysis remains

highly relevant in modern globalization, where the fragmentation of value chains profoundly impacts social and economic structures.

This perspective resonates with contemporary policy considerations, such as *Proposal n°505* concerning the Decree on Foreign Investments in France and the Protection of Strategic Industrial Groups. The proposal highlights the pivotal role of industrial sovereignty, stating that "a nation's industrial power is the guarantee of its economic independence, its ability to innovate, provide sustainable employment for its people, and create wealth to finance social solidarity sustainably" (Proposal n°105, page 1). The argument underscores the strategic importance of protecting national industries from external control to preserve economic and social stability.

Similar themes are explored by scholars such as Dani Rodrik (2011) in *The Globalization Paradox*, who emphasizes the inherent tensions between hyper-globalization, national sovereignty, and democratic governance. Rodrik argues that nations must strike a balance between economic integration and the preservation of domestic social contracts. Likewise, Michael Sandel (2020), in *The Tyranny of Merit*, critiques the commodification of social goods and highlights the risks of reducing human relations to market transactions, eroding social cohesion.

The challenges to social relations, as highlighted by the social movements of the Yellow Vests ("Gilets jaunes") in November 2020, are part of a reality finely analyzed by Christophe Guilluy in his work *La France périphérique* since 2015: the downward mobility of entire social categories (Maurin, 2009) and a territorial divide that threatens the cohesion of the country (Insee, 2021), exacerbated by the lack of renewal of elites in a stagnant society (Crozier, 1999).

These works collectively illustrate the enduring challenge of reconciling economic imperatives with social and political objectives in an increasingly interconnected global economy. They call

for reimagining market systems that can flexibly integrate diverse and sometimes conflicting stakeholder expectations.

While companies are not meant to replace the state, they can, at their level, mitigate inequalities and address, for example, the causes of workplace discontent, which is more pronounced in France than in other countries (Fourquet et al., 2018; CESE, 2023) : disparities between qualifications and job positions, responsibilities limited to mere execution, inadequate managerial methods, bureaucratic burdens, etc. These realities, which influence the sense of social decline, must be corrected where they are most keenly felt, namely within companies. How could a company incapable of meeting its employees' legitimate aspirations claim to play a role in sustainable development or environmental transformation? The recent example of Danone proves that when the internal and external dimensions are too disconnected, a mission-driven company exposes itself to severe setbacks (Lévêque & Segrestin, 2021). Sovereignty can also be understood internally, reflecting the company's ability to adapt its organizational configurations to align with its strategic objectives in response to environmental demands. These configurations encompass the organization's structural dimensions and human resource management practices.

Within the framework of CSR, the sovereign brand must address its employees' legitimate aspirations, and we propose the following:

[P4]- The sovereign brand, contributes to reducing social inequalities and workplace dissatisfaction in a market economy where social relations are embedded in the economy.

The sovereign brand contributes to sustainable development

Does the sovereign brand contribute to environmental protection and, more broadly, to the objectives assigned to CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility)? Several viewpoints allow us to address this question. Firstly, it is essential to question the legitimacy of specific outsourcing policies due to the negative externalities they generate, namely the induced effects of such policies on the human, social, and environmental levels. Beyond the economists' perspective, it is essential to adopt the sociologist's viewpoint on negative externalities that Friedberg and Musselin (1999) describe as the externalization of cooperation costs. In the subcontracting of products and services, it is evident that many actors offload onto subcontractors in developing countries, leaving them to bear the regulatory costs they are unwilling to shoulder: excessive working hours, personal risk-taking, regulatory fraud, and this also applies to environmental protection and the fight against pollution.

However, if environmental quality and, more broadly, social rights are to be considered a global public good (Darrigues & Montaud, 2011), relinquishing sovereignty for often short-term reasons has significant consequences for the planet. Let us not be naive. The restoration of economic sovereignty does not guarantee an "ecological and social rupture," according to the terms of an Attac France report (2022). One of the conditions is to embed economic sovereignty in sustainable development, which Ignacy Sachs (1980) defines as eco-development: "The development of populations by themselves, making the best use of natural resources, adapting to an environment they transform without destroying it." For the author, it is up to each human group in a specific situation to devise its unique strategy based on its resources. It means to "implement a life project deemed the best socio-politically." This perspective is appealing because it establishes an undeniable link between eco-development and economic sovereignty. Therefore, we propose the following:

[P5]- The sovereign brand, when operating within the framework of eco-development, makes a positive contribution to sustainable development.

CONCLUSION

The economic and diplomatic shift imposed on the world by the COVID crisis and the war in Ukraine has highlighted the weaknesses of interdependent economies. The challenges of sustainable development, the threats posed by climate change, and the worsening of social inequalities have led to a growing awareness of the urgency of these issues. We are only mentioning a few of the negative externalities caused or exacerbated by the globalization of economies. While we have agreed that economic interdependence is a reality that cannot be challenged, the level of dependence accepted can no longer be such that it permanently deprives companies, and consequently brands, of any maneuvering room regarding the social and environmental components of durability and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility).

Our article aims to open a new field of research around the idea that there can be no sustainable development without economic sovereignty and no CSR without sustainable development. We have endeavored to show in a series of propositions, which will soon need to be translated into hypotheses for validation, that the reconstruction of value chains that allow nations and companies to preserve their leeway now integrates, more than ever, objectives that are precisely those of CSR. In this regard, the sovereign brand protects social rights, contributes to environmental protection, and is an essential component of sustainable development.

The legitimate concern for "Made in France," an attribute of the sovereign brand, must be combined with "Made Differently." We do not purchase a product solely for its (re)localization but because this localization reflects a set of distinctive attributes. We believe that developing

sovereign brands is the means to construct this "differently" by integrating concerns inherent to CSR.

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