

SUSTAINABILITY AS CONTEXTUALIZED MEANING AND MARKETING NARRATIVE: A QUALITATIVE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF OLIVE OIL SMES IN PALESTINE AND GREECE

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Abstract

This study examines how olive oil SMEs in Palestine and Greece construct and communicate sustainability as a marketing narrative, addressing four research questions: how sustainability is defined by producers, how these meanings translate into marketing narratives, what ethical logics underpin communication practices, and how macro-contextual factors shape narrative convergences and divergences. Conceptualizing sustainability as a contextually embedded system of meaning shaped by socio-political, institutional, and moral conditions, the research adopts a qualitative comparative multiple-case study design. Data were collected through 60 semi-structured interviews with SME owners, production managers, and marketing coordinators (30 per context), complemented by marketing materials analysis and exploratory consumer feedback (n=16). Thematic analysis with a structured coding hierarchy was employed, achieving saturation after the 25th interview per context. Findings reveal that sustainability functions as a narrative mechanism for articulating legitimacy, authenticity, and continuity. Greek SMEs frame sustainability through heritage, certification, and market legitimacy, reflecting integration into European institutional regimes. Palestinian SMEs construct sustainability through moral responsibility, resilience, and place attachment, shaped by political constraints and economic precarity. Exploratory consumer insights suggest that narrative reception is context-dependent: certification-based claims resonate in regulated markets, while moral narratives gain traction among culturally proximate audiences. The study contributes a conceptual framework positioning sustainability as a dynamic, relational narrative construction process, advancing sustainability marketing literature through a moral economy perspective. This shifts analytical attention from predefined sustainability indicators to producer-driven sensemaking and provides five testable propositions for future cross-context research on sustainability communication in agri-food systems.

Keywords: sustainability marketing, olive oil SMEs, narrative analysis, moral economy

Paper Type: Research Paper

1. Introduction

Sustainability has become a central organizing principle in contemporary agri-food systems, shaping production practices, regulatory frameworks, and market communication. Beyond environmental indicators, sustainability increasingly functions as a symbolic and ethical reference through which producers articulate values, legitimacy, and long-term orientations (Adami, 2025; Loumou & Giourga, 2003; Ncube et al., 2022; Purvis, Mao, & Robinson, 2018). In the Mediterranean region, olive oil occupies a prominent position in this discourse, not merely as an agricultural commodity but as a culturally embedded livelihood linked to intergenerational knowledge, land stewardship, and enduring community-landscape relationships (Loumou & Giourga, 2003; Ncube et al., 2022).

Existing research on olive oil sustainability has primarily focused on environmental indicators, farming practices, certification schemes, and quality standards, approaching sustainability as an externally defined framework shaped by policy instruments and market expectations (Béné et al., 2019; Ncube et al., 2022). Consequently, limited attention has been paid to how producers themselves perceive and articulate sustainability, particularly in SMEs that constitute the structural backbone of Mediterranean olive oil production (Karanikolas et al., 2021; Roselli, Carlucci, & Gennaro, 2016). Similarly, sustainability marketing research remains predominantly consumer-centric and quantitative, privileging consumer perceptions over producer meaning-making processes (Boza et al., 2023; Roselli et al., 2016). This gap is pronounced in traditional agri-food sectors, where sustainability is embedded in everyday practices and moral obligations rather than formalized strategies (Boza et al., 2023; Demers & Gond, 2019). What existing studies overlook is not sustainability's relevance to producers, but how it is actively interpreted, narrated, and morally justified under different institutional and socio-political conditions. By prioritizing predefined indicators, the literature obscures producers' role as meaning-makers who construct sustainability through lived experience, a limitation particularly salient for SMEs operating under divergent regulatory structures and political-economic stability.

Against this background, the present study adopts a qualitative comparative approach to examine how olive oil SMEs in Palestine and Greece conceptualize sustainability and translate these understandings into marketing narratives. The comparison is analytically purposeful: Greece operates within a highly institutionalized European regime characterized by certification systems and export-oriented dynamics, whereas Palestine is shaped by political constraints, economic fragility, and restricted market access, with olive cultivation bound to land, identity, and survival (Boza et al., 2023; Karanikolas et al., 2021). This study investigates four research questions: (1) How do olive oil SME owners and managers in Palestine and Greece define and conceptualize sustainability? (2) How are these meanings translated into marketing narratives? (3) What ethical and contextual logics underpin their sustainability communication practices? (4) How do macro-contextual factors shape narrative convergences and divergences across the two contexts? Rather than treating sustainability as a universal construct, the study conceptualizes it as a contextualized meaning system articulated through narratives, moral justifications, and symbolic representations, positioning sustainability marketing as a narrative-driven, context-sensitive practice rooted in lived experience and moral economy dynamics (Roselli, Carlucci, & Gennaro, 2016).

This study is primarily a moral economy study of sustainability narratives, extended by insights from narrative marketing and institutional logics perspectives. It explicitly differentiates itself from three related literatures: (a) institutional logics research, which focuses on organizational responses to institutional pressures but rarely examines narrative construction; (b) sensemaking literature, which emphasizes cognitive processes but underplays moral justifications; and (c) sustainability communication research, which remains largely consumer-centric. By integrating these perspectives with a moral economy lens, the study explains how sustainability narratives are anchored in distinct ethical logics—market legitimacy and institutional compliance in Greece versus continuity, custodianship, and resilience in Palestine. Accordingly, this study contributes to sustainability marketing research in three ways: First, it advances a meaning-based conceptualization of sustainability as contextualized narrative construction rather than a universal attribute. Second, it demonstrates how socio-political conditions shape sustainability communication through a moral economy perspective. Third, through its comparative design, it proposes an inductive framework linking macro-contextual conditions to meaning construction, marketing communication, and audience reception.

2. Literature Review

Research on sustainability in the olive oil sector has developed along environmental, agronomic, and socio-economic lines. Studies highlight olive groves' role in supporting soil conservation, biodiversity, water efficiency, and climate resilience in Mediterranean landscapes (Baniyas et al., 2017; Berbel & Posadillo, 2018; Donner & Radić, 2021). Olive cultivation is also framed as a socio-cultural activity sustaining rural livelihoods and reinforcing regional identity, positioning olive oil as both agricultural product and cultural heritage (Roselli, Carlucci, & Gennaro, 2016). Within European contexts, sustainability has become institutionalized through regulatory and market-based mechanisms, including certification schemes, PDO and PGI labels, organic standards, and traceability systems (Erraach et al., 2021; Marescotti et al., 2020). However, this outcome-oriented approach narrows sustainability to quantifiable metrics, privileging external evaluation over producers' interpretive practices (Berbel & Posadillo, 2018; Donner & Radić, 2021). This limitation is particularly salient for SMEs, which often engage selectively with standardized metrics or reinterpret them according to local priorities, yet their voices remain largely absent from sustainability research (Bos-Brouwers, 2009; Charters et al., 2017).

Within marketing research, storytelling has emerged as a key mechanism for communicating values, establishing authenticity, and securing legitimacy. In agri-food contexts, sustainability narratives are closely linked to place branding and terroir, where locality, origin, tradition, and environmental conditions jointly generate symbolic and economic value (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). For olive oil SMEs, sustainability narratives typically take the form of place-based storytelling linking environmental responsibility with craftsmanship, heritage, and quality, often blurring the boundary between marketing communication and moral expression (Berbel & Posadillo, 2018; Donner & Radić, 2021). Consumer preferences have shifted from generic quality cues toward nuanced evaluations emphasizing origin, sustainability, and ethical attributes

(Charters et al., 2017; Roselli, Carlucci, & Gennaro, 2016). Place branding scholarship highlights that sustainability narratives mediate between internal identity and external perception, continuously negotiated through producer-market-consumer interactions (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

Despite these insights, sustainability marketing research suffers from three critical gaps that this study directly addresses. First, it remains predominantly consumer-centric, treating narratives as strategic instruments for influencing consumer perception rather than expressions of producer meaning-making (Berbel & Posadillo, 2018; Jansson et al., 2015). Producers appear as sources of claims rather than active narrators who construct sustainability through lived experience. Second, the literature rarely examines how producers themselves construct sustainability narratives in relation to place, tradition, institutional constraints, and moral considerations. The interpretive processes through which SMEs translate external pressures into internal understandings remain undertheorized. Third, existing research largely ignores the role of moral justifications in sustainability communication, reducing narratives to authenticity claims or strategic differentiation tools while overlooking the ethical commitments that often drive SME sustainability practices. These gaps are particularly consequential for comparative research, as they assume universal sustainability meanings rather than investigating how context shapes narrative construction.

The moral economy perspective provides a critical framework for addressing these gaps by understanding sustainability as a contextually embedded and ethically grounded process. This approach emphasizes social norms, ethical obligations, and collective values over efficiency or profit maximization. For SMEs operating under uncertainty, sustainability is framed less as environmental optimization and more as a condition for continuity, dignity, and responsibility toward land, community, and future generations (Adami, 2025; Jansson et al., 2015; Malesios et al., 2018). Sustainability challenges are interpreted not as external compliance pressures but as integral survival strategies shaped by moral commitments (Jansson et al., 2015; Malesios et al., 2018). Research indicates that SMEs frame sustainability as opportunities for resilience, with entrepreneurial values aligning narratives with broader social purposes (Cantele & Zardini, 2019; Laguir, Laguir, & Baz, 2015).

In politically and economically constrained environments, moral imperatives become particularly salient drivers of sustainability behavior. SMEs engage in responsible practices out of necessity, seeking legitimacy and continuity under adverse conditions (Boiral et al., 2013; Clemente-Almendros, Vallejo García, & Blanco-Hernández, 2025; Loucks, Martens, & Cho, 2010). Sustainability efforts are motivated by obligations rooted in collective values and intergenerational stewardship rather than regulatory incentives (Boiral et al., 2013; Moore & Manning, 2009; Moursellas et al., 2023). However, constraints related to finance, information, and technology limit SMEs' capacity to formalize sustainability initiatives, with limited adoption of standardized strategies reflecting trade-offs between immediate survival and longer-term ethical commitments (Boiral et al., 2013; Jansson et al., 2015; Moursellas et al., 2023). Overall, the moral economy perspective offers a robust framework for understanding sustainability in SMEs as a lived, negotiated, and context-dependent process. Yet existing moral economy research has rarely been applied to comparative marketing contexts or integrated with narrative analysis. This study extends the moral economy lens by examining how contrasting macro-contextual conditions—institutional density in Greece versus

political constraint in Palestine – produce different narrative logics of sustainability, and how these narratives are received by diverse consumer audiences.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative multiple-case study design to examine how sustainability is constructed, interpreted, and communicated by olive oil SMEs across two contrasting macro-contexts: Palestine and Greece. A qualitative approach is appropriate given the study's focus on sustainability as a contextualized meaning system rather than a set of predefined indicators. The Palestine-Greece comparison is analytically purposeful: these contexts differ markedly in regulatory density, market integration, and socio-political stability, enabling examination of sustainability narratives under contrasting institutional and moral conditions. Consistent with Carlucci, Gennaro, Roselli, and Seccia (2014), the design positions context as a constitutive element in meaning construction rather than a background variable.

SMEs were selected using purposive sampling criteria: (a) active olive oil production for at least five years, (b) identifiable marketing practices (packaging, website, or promotional texts), (c) size between 10 and 250 employees (consistent with both EU and Palestinian SME definitions), and (d) geographic diversity within each country (Crete and Peloponnese in Greece; Nablus, Hebron, and Bethlehem in Palestine). Fourteen SMEs (seven per context) participated. The core empirical material comprises 60 semi-structured interviews conducted between October and December 2025, with 30 participants from each context. Participants included owner-managers (n=24), production managers (n=20), and marketing coordinators (n=16), a distribution that ensured both strategic and operational perspectives across firm sizes and functional roles (Laguir, Laguir, & Baz, 2015).

Three interviewers conducted the interviews: one Greek national (fluent in Greek and English), one Palestinian national (fluent in Arabic and English), and one bilingual research assistant. All interviewers completed a two-day training session that included pilot interviews with two non-participant SMEs per context, reflexivity memo writing to address potential bias, translation protocol review including back-translation for conceptual equivalence, and ethical conduct guidelines. Interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes and were conducted in Arabic, English, or Greek according to participant preference. The sample size was determined by thematic saturation, which was reached after the 25th interview in each context, with five additional interviews per context confirming that no new themes emerged (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020).

Alongside the interviews, the study analyzed marketing materials (packaging, websites, promotional texts, and social media content) and field notes from each participating SME. To address the limitation of a producer-only perspective, exploratory consumer feedback was incorporated through brief conversations with 16 consumers and intermediaries (8 per context), including specialty retailers, export agents, and end consumers encountered at local markets and food fairs. These 15 to 25 minute interactions captured initial reactions to sustainability narratives and identified alignment or divergence between producer framing and consumer interpretation (Charters et al., 2017; Erraach et al., 2021).

Data were analyzed using iterative thematic analysis. Open coding was conducted manually with NVivo software support, guided by inductive logic that enabled themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed a priori. Through constant comparison, initial codes were refined into higher-order themes via axial coding, applied consistently across both datasets to ensure analytical comparability. Table 1 presents the coding hierarchy, showing examples of open codes (with verbatim quote illustrations), axial codes, and final themes. Beyond thematic coding, the analysis captured narrative elements including identity claims, moral evaluations, place references, and legitimacy markers. Marketing materials were coded using the same framework to assess alignment between narrated and communicated meanings (Berbel & Posadillo, 2018; Donner & Radić, 2021). Exploratory consumer data were analyzed separately using a simplified thematic approach focused on reception patterns.

Table 1: Coding Hierarchy

Theme	Axial Code	Open Code (Example Quote)
Heritage & Quality	Heritage preservation	"We keep the old varieties passed down from grandfathers" (Greek SME owner, #G-04)
Economic Orientation	Market legitimacy	"Certification opens export markets for us" (Greek marketing coordinator, #G-11)
Moral Responsibility	Intergenerational obligation	"I owe it to my father and my children to continue" (Palestinian SME owner, #P-03)
Resilience & Place Attachment	Persistence under constraint	"We stay even when there are checkpoints" (Palestinian production manager, #P-12)
Consumer Reception	Verification expectations	"Customers ask for certificates first, sustainability without proof is just marketing" (Greek retailer, #C-G02)
Consumer Reception	Solidarity-based evaluation	"When I buy Palestinian oil, I am supporting the land and the people, it is not about labels" (Palestinian consumer, #C-P03)

The researchers possess expertise in marketing and sustainability with extended familiarity with the Eastern Mediterranean context. Reflexive memoing was employed throughout the research process—from interview design through data analysis—to enhance analytical transparency and address potential bias. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation, were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and had identifying details removed during transcription, replaced with anonymized codes (e.g., #G-04, #P-03). Trustworthiness was strengthened through four strategies: data triangulation across interviews, marketing materials, and consumer feedback; iterative coding with constant comparison; cross-case comparison between Palestine and Greece; and member checking with a subset of participants (five per context) who reviewed summaries of their interviews to confirm accuracy of interpretation.

4. Findings: An Integrated Comparative Analysis

The findings demonstrate that sustainability in olive oil SMEs functions as a context-dependent narrative system rather than a standardized construct. Across both contexts, sustainability narratives draw on shared cultural references—heritage, quality, and land relationships—yet these are mobilized through distinct interpretive logics shaped by divergent institutional environments and moral economies. In Greece, sustainability is framed through institutionalized narratives of market legitimacy, certification, and regulatory compliance. In Palestine, it is constructed through moral responsibility, economic continuity, resilience, and place attachment, shaped by political constraint and economic precarity. Table 1 synthesizes these patterns, illustrating how macro-contextual conditions shape sustainability meanings, responsibility frameworks, heritage roles, and consumer reception dynamics.

Table 2: Integrated Comparative Analysis of Sustainability Narrative Logics

Narrative Dimension	Greek Context	Palestinian Context
Heritage & Quality	Heritage as market resource linked to terroir, certification, and differentiation	Heritage as moral obligation tied to land, lineage, and collective identity
Economic Orientation	Sustainability as market legitimacy through standards and certification	Sustainability as economic continuity focused on survival and livelihood
Responsibility Logic	Institutional responsibility: accountability to regulatory frameworks	Moral responsibility: land stewardship and intergenerational obligation
Resilience & Place Attachment	Not salient	Central narrative emphasizing resilience and attachment to land
Consumer Reception	Certification-driven evaluation; institutional trust	Solidarity and emotional resonance; cultural identification

In both Palestinian and Greek cases, sustainability is anchored in narratives of heritage preservation and product quality. Producers reject sustainability as a recent managerial innovation, framing it instead as continuity with inherited agricultural practices, intergenerational knowledge, and enduring relationships with land and olive trees (Langgut et al., 2019). This shared foundation is translated through different logics. Greek SMEs convert heritage into a market-oriented resource, linking tradition to terroir, certification, and geographical indications, framing sustainability as authenticity and export legitimacy (Chatzinikolaou, 2025; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). A participant stated: "*Terroir is our competitive advantage. The soil, the climate, the varieties—these are what make Greek oil unique in international markets.*" Palestinian SMEs narrate heritage as moral and historical obligation toward land, lineage, and community continuity (Sultan et al., 2022). One participant expressed: "*These trees carry our history; sustainability means not breaking that link*" (Palestinian SME owner, #P-02). Another noted: "*For us, olive oil is not a commodity; it's a story of family, land, and ancestors. When we press the oil, the whole family gathers—this is the real sustainability.*" Interpretively, similar cultural practices generate different sustainability meanings because institutional context transforms heritage: in Greece, institutional density (EU certifications, PDO/PGI systems) converts heritage into a market asset for differentiation and export legitimacy; in Palestine, political constraint and institutional absence prevent heritage from functioning primarily as a market resource, so it operates instead as a moral obligation tied to survival and collective identity.

A core divergence concerns how sustainability is linked to economic outcomes. Greek SMEs frame sustainability as market legitimacy, emphasizing standards, certification, and export requirements as conditions for credibility within global value chains. Sustainability operates as a legitimacy device rendering practices auditable and recognizable (Klarin & Sharmelly, 2023). A participant noted: "*Without standards and certificates, buyers do not listen to you, even if your practices are good*" (Greek SME owner, #G-03). Greek producers also navigate tensions between institutional requirements and traditional practices: "*The European Union gives us a framework, but also a lot of paperwork. Sometimes I wonder if the certification is more important than the actual practice.*" Palestinian SMEs articulate sustainability as economic continuity under constraint. In a volatile environment with movement restrictions and market uncertainty, sustainability means maintaining production and livelihoods rather than expanding competitiveness. A participant stated: "*For us, sustainability means being able to keep producing next year*" (Palestinian SME owner, #P-01). Another noted: "*Stability for us is not growth; it is simply making it through the season and paying workers.*" Interpretively, this divergence reflects differing institutional logics and resource constraints. In Greece, market legitimacy operates through compliance-based mechanisms where sustainability signals quality and reliability for export markets. In Palestine, economic continuity operates through survival-based mechanisms where sustainability is measured by persistence rather than growth. The absence of institutional infrastructure redirects sustainability from market-oriented goals to existential continuity.

Responsibility is central across both contexts, but its object and orientation differ significantly. Greek SMEs frame sustainability through institutional responsibility: accountability to standards, certification, and regulatory requirements. A participant articulated: "*Responsibility means having documents, traceability, and proof that what we claim can be checked*" (Greek

marketing coordinator, #G-12). Another noted tension: *"My grandfather used no chemicals and the trees were healthy. But today, without certifications, you cannot export. So we adapt tradition to market demands."* Palestinian SMEs narrate responsibility as moral obligation grounded in land stewardship, community accountability, and intergenerational continuity. A participant stated: *"We are only caretakers of this land"* (Palestinian SME owner, #P-03). Another emphasized intergenerational transmission: *"My father taught me how to care for the tree, and I teach my children. Sustainability is this unbroken chain, not a certificate from outside"* (Palestinian production manager, #P-10). Interpretively, institutional responsibility in Greece is outward-facing and verification-oriented, serving as a gatekeeper to market participation. Moral responsibility in Palestine is inward-facing and continuity-oriented, serving as a foundation for identity and persistence. Where institutional infrastructures are stable, responsibility is procedural; where they are unstable or absent, responsibility becomes existential (Köhler et al., 2019).

A distinct narrative appears only in the Palestinian case: resilience and place attachment. This narrative extends beyond environmental or market logics to existential meanings of continuity and rootedness under persistent political and economic uncertainty. A participant stated: *"Harvesting olives is how we stay connected to the land, whatever the conditions"* (Palestinian SME owner, #P-05). Another noted: *"Sometimes military checkpoints prevent us from reaching the land, but we keep waiting and returning. Sustainability for us is not giving up, even when conditions are against you"* (Palestinian production manager, #P-12). This narrative is absent in Greek data. One Greek producer noted: *"Water is our biggest challenge in Crete. Sustainability for us means managing every drop. That is not marketing; it is survival"* (Greek SME owner, #G-07). While invoking survival language, the challenge is resource management within a stable institutional context rather than existential persistence under political constraint. Interpretively, resilience emerges as a sustainability narrative only when political uncertainty directly threatens the continuation of agricultural practice. In Palestine, sustainability acquires an existential dimension where livelihood, place, and moral commitment converge, resonating with scholarship on place attachment in crisis-affected contexts (Adami, 2025).

Exploratory interactions with consumers and intermediaries provided preliminary insights into how sustainability messages are received. In the Greek context, consumers and intermediaries demonstrated high familiarity with certification-based claims. A retailer noted: *"Customers ask for certificates first—sustainability without proof is just marketing"* (Greek retailer, #C-G02). This aligns with institutionalized sustainability logic in Greek producer narratives. In Palestine, consumer reception operated through different criteria. A consumer expressed: *"When I buy Palestinian oil, I am supporting the land and the people—it is not about labels"* (Palestinian consumer, #C-P03). Another noted: *"The story of survival matters more than a stamp."* Gaps between producer narratives and consumer expectations emerged in both contexts. Greek producers expressed frustration: *"We tell our story, but buyers want documents."* Palestinian producers noted communication challenges: *"How do you explain sumud [steadfastness] to someone who has never faced a checkpoint?"* Interpretively, narrative reception is shaped by audience evaluative frameworks. In institutionally dense markets, consumers prioritize verifiable credentials as trust signals. In contexts of cultural or political solidarity, moral and place-based narratives carry greater weight. Sustainability marketing is thus a relational accomplishment requiring alignment between producer framing and consumer interpretive frameworks (Demers & Gond, 2019; Erraach et al., 2021).

Overall, the findings confirm the study's central claim: sustainability in olive oil SMEs is a contextually embedded narrative shaped by structural constraints, cultural meanings, lived experience, and audience reception dynamics.

5. Discussion and Conceptual Framework

This study demonstrates that sustainability marketing is best understood as a narrative and context-sensitive practice rather than a standardized managerial function. Addressing the research questions, Greek SMEs define sustainability as market legitimacy through certification and regulatory compliance, translating this into narratives emphasizing certification claims and traceability, underpinned by institutional responsibility shaped by regulatory density and EU integration. Palestinian SMEs define sustainability as moral continuity, resilience, and attachment to land, translating this into place-based storytelling and moral appeals, underpinned by moral responsibility and intergenerational obligation shaped by political constraint, economic precarity, and restricted market access. Exploratory consumer findings suggest that certification-driven claims resonate in regulated markets, while moral and resilience-based narratives gain traction among culturally proximate audiences. Sustainability marketing thus operates as a relational accomplishment requiring alignment between producer framing and consumer interpretive frameworks.

This study advances theory in three distinct ways. First, it challenges the dominant instrumental view of sustainability marketing. Existing research typically treats sustainability narratives as strategic tools deployed to influence consumer perceptions or achieve competitive advantage. The findings demonstrate, conversely, that sustainability narratives are expressions of moral economy—producers articulate deeply held moral commitments that precede and exceed market logic. In Palestine particularly, sustainability is narrated as an existential practice of endurance and intergenerational obligation that would persist regardless of market incentives, suggesting that sustainability marketing theory requires a moral foundation largely absent from consumer-centric models. Second, it extends narrative theory in marketing by specifying the relational conditions of narrative effectiveness. Existing narrative research has focused on narrative structure, authenticity claims, or place branding, but has largely ignored how narrative reception depends on alignment between producer framing and audience evaluative frameworks. The exploratory consumer findings indicate that the same sustainability narrative may resonate strongly with one audience while falling flat with another, depending on whether the audience prioritizes certification-based verification or solidarity-based identification. Narrative effectiveness is therefore not an inherent property of the narrative itself but a relational accomplishment contingent on audience proximity to the production context. Third, it contributes to moral economy literature by specifying how political constraint transforms sustainability discourse. Under conditions of political uncertainty and institutional absence, sustainability shifts from an environmental or managerial goal to an existential practice of continuity and endurance. In Palestine, sustainability becomes indistinguishable from survival—not as rhetorical exaggeration but as material reality, extending moral economy theory beyond its traditional focus on labor relations into sustainability communication.

Based on the findings, we propose an inductive conceptual framework where sustainability is not a fixed attribute but a multi-level narrative construction process. The framework emerged from the comparative analysis and specifies directional relationships and mechanisms linking macro-contextual conditions to sustainability narratives and audience reception. Figure 1 illustrates the framework.

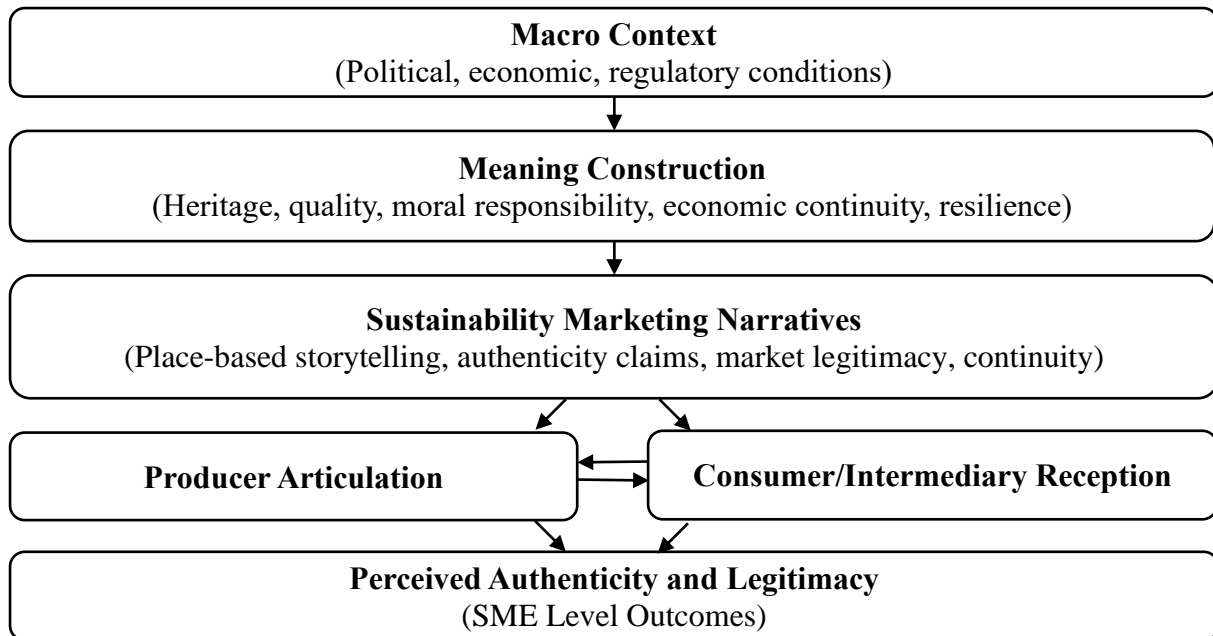


Figure 1: Sustainability as a Contextualized Narrative Construction Process

The figure illustrates the multi-level narrative construction process through which sustainability meanings emerge. At the top, macro-contextual conditions (political, economic, and regulatory) differ systematically between Greece and Palestine. These conditions activate two mechanisms: institutional pressure (predominant in Greece) and resource constraint (predominant in Palestine). These mechanisms shape meaning construction, where producers draw on categories such as heritage, quality, moral responsibility, economic continuity, and resilience. Meaning construction informs the development of sustainability marketing narratives, which take different forms in each context: certification claims and market legitimacy narratives in Greece; moral appeals, resilience narratives, and continuity framing in Palestine. These narratives are received by consumers and intermediaries through different evaluative frameworks: certification-driven evaluation in Greece, solidarity-based evaluation in Palestine. The outcome is perceived authenticity and legitimacy at the SME level, which feeds back into narrative refinement over time through the feedback loop.

Meaning construction refers to the interpretive process through which producers translate macro-contextual conditions into categories of understanding about what sustainability means and why it matters, shaped by available cultural resources (heritage, tradition), institutional templates (certification schemes), and material constraints (market access, political stability). Narrative logic refers to the underlying principle that organizes sustainability claims into coherent stories. Two narrative logics emerged: a market legitimacy logic (predominant in Greece) organized around compliance, certification, and export

credibility; and a moral continuity logic (predominant in Palestine) organized around endurance, intergenerational obligation, and place attachment.

The framework specifies two mechanisms through which macro-contextual conditions shape sustainability narratives. First, institutional pressure—comprising regulations, certification requirements, export standards, and quality assurance systems—activates market-legitimacy narratives. Where institutional pressure is high as in Greece, sustainability narratives emphasize compliance, verifiability, and formal credentials. Second, resource constraint—comprising market access limitations, political instability, financial precarity, and mobility restrictions—activates moral-continuity and resilience narratives. Where resource constraint is severe as in Palestine, sustainability narratives emphasize persistence, collective responsibility, and attachment to land despite material hardship. The framework posits a linear yet interactive process: macro-context shapes, through these two mechanisms, the available resources for meaning construction. Meaning construction then informs sustainability marketing narratives, which are received through evaluative frameworks that shape perceived authenticity and legitimacy, feeding back into narrative refinement.

Existing frameworks in sustainability marketing treat context as a background variable or moderator. This model specifies how context translates into narrative forms through identifiable mechanisms, shifting sustainability marketing from an attribute-based understanding to a process-based understanding. Rather than merely observing that SMEs communicate certification claims, the framework explains that institutional pressure in regulated contexts activates compliance narratives, while resource constraint in precarious contexts activates moral-continuity narratives.

The integrated analysis enables the formulation of five empirically testable propositions for future quantitative, mixed-method, or comparative replication studies. Proposition 1 (Heritage and Quality): In institutionally embedded markets, heritage-based narratives support product differentiation and export legitimacy; in politically constrained contexts, heritage-based narratives are associated with moral obligation and collective identity. Proposition 2 (Economic Orientation): Sustainability narratives emphasize market legitimacy in contexts characterized by regulatory stability, while prioritizing economic survival in politically and economically constrained environments. Proposition 3 (Responsibility Logics): In regulated contexts, sustainability responsibility is communicated through institutional accountability and external verification; in constrained contexts, through moral accountability and intergenerational obligation. Proposition 4 (Resilience and Place Attachment): Narratives of resilience emerge primarily in contexts marked by political uncertainty, where sustainability is evaluated in terms of endurance rather than compliance. Proposition 5 (Consumer Reception): The effectiveness of sustainability narratives depends on alignment between producer framing and consumer evaluative frameworks; certification-based narratives drive trust in institutionally dense markets, while moral and resilience-based narratives resonate in contexts of cultural or political solidarity.

In comparison with existing literature, the findings extend research in three distinct literatures. First, unlike institutional logics research which examines organizational responses to institutional demands, the present study centers on how producers narrate sustainability as the site where institutional pressures are interpreted, morally justified, and translated into

communication. Second, unlike sensemaking research which emphasizes cognitive processes, the present study foregrounds moral justifications as distinct from cognitive frames—sustainability was narrated in explicitly moral terms including obligation to ancestors, caretakership of land, and responsibility to community that cannot be reduced to cognitive sensemaking. Third, unlike existing sustainability communication research which remains predominantly consumer-centric, this study shifts attention to producer meaning-making while incorporating consumer reception as a relational dynamic, explaining not only what consumers prefer but also how and why producers construct the narratives that consumers encounter.

6. Implications for Sustainable Practices

The findings of this study offer several actionable implications for managers, policymakers, and marketers seeking to ensure sustainable business practices in the olive oil sector and similar agri-food industries. For SME managers and owner-operators, the most critical insight is that sustainability communication cannot follow a universal template. In institutionally dense markets such as Greece, investment in certification schemes including PDO, PGI, organic, and Fair Trade labels, along with traceability systems, is essential for establishing market legitimacy. Managers in these contexts should integrate these credentials into their core marketing narratives rather than treating them as administrative burdens. Practical steps include featuring certification logos prominently on packaging, developing website sections dedicated to explaining certification processes, and training sales staff to articulate the meaning behind each credential. Conversely, in politically constrained or resource-limited contexts such as Palestine, managers should emphasize moral responsibility, intergenerational stewardship, and place attachment as authentic sustainability narratives. These resonate strongly with culturally proximate audiences and diaspora consumers who prioritize solidarity over formal certification. Practical strategies include storytelling about family farming traditions, documenting intergenerational knowledge transfer, and highlighting community benefits rather than abstract environmental metrics. For managers operating across multiple markets, segmented sustainability communication strategies are essential: certification-based claims for regulated export markets, and moral and heritage narratives for culturally aligned consumer segments. A mixed approach combining certification credentials for institutional buyers with narrative-rich storytelling for end consumers may optimize market reach.

A further critical implication concerns the relationship between claims and practices. SMEs must avoid decoupling sustainability claims from actual operational realities. The findings indicate that perceived authenticity—whether achieved through certification or demonstrated moral consistency—is a key driver of consumer trust and legitimacy. Managers should ensure that marketing narratives accurately reflect operational practices, as inconsistencies between claims and actual behaviors can damage credibility irreparably. For resource-constrained SMEs, low-cost narrative strategies offer accessible pathways. Digital platforms including social media, websites, and e-commerce listings provide channels for sharing sustainability stories without significant financial investment. Collaborating with local universities, NGOs,

or industry associations can provide credibility and extend narrative reach beyond what individual SMEs could achieve alone.

For policymakers and industry associations, the findings underscore the need for flexible frameworks that accommodate diverse pathways to sustainability. Formal certification, while valuable in regulated markets, may be inaccessible or less relevant for SMEs in constrained environments. Alternative mechanisms such as community-based verification, participatory guarantee systems, or formal recognition of traditional practices could validate sustainability without imposing undue bureaucratic burdens on small producers. Industry associations should facilitate knowledge exchange between SMEs operating in different contexts. The comparative insights from this study suggest that Greek SMEs could benefit from understanding moral economy framings and the power of place-based storytelling, while Palestinian SMEs might gain from incremental certification capacity-building that opens access to export markets. Cross-context learning networks could stimulate innovation in sustainability communication that benefits all participants.

For marketers and communication specialists, understanding audience evaluative frameworks—whether certification-driven or solidarity-based—is essential for crafting resonant narratives. Marketers should conduct audience segmentation based on cultural proximity, political identification, and familiarity with production contexts. The findings conclusively demonstrate that narrative effectiveness depends less on the objective characteristics of sustainability practices and more on the alignment between producer framing and consumer interpretive frameworks. Marketers should therefore test narrative reception iteratively. What resonates strongly with culturally proximate audiences may fail entirely in institutionally dense markets, and vice versa. A/B testing of certification-focused messaging against heritage-focused messaging across different consumer segments can optimize communication strategies and improve return on marketing investment.

Finally, for sustainability transitions more broadly, this study demonstrates that agri-food systems require recognition that SMEs are not passive adopters of externally defined standards but active narrators who construct sustainability through lived experience, moral commitment, and local knowledge. Supporting SME sustainability means enabling narrative agency rather than imposing compliance frameworks that may be ill-suited to local contexts. Policy interventions should therefore combine capacity-building for certification where feasible with explicit recognition and support for moral economy-driven sustainability where formal systems are inaccessible or inappropriate. Ultimately, effective sustainability communication is not about applying a universal template but about understanding and respecting the contextual, ethical, and relational dimensions that give sustainability its meaning for producers and consumers alike.

7. Conclusion

This study fundamentally demonstrates that sustainability in olive oil SMEs cannot be adequately understood as a purely technical attribute or a context-free managerial instrument. Rather, it emerges essentially as a context-dependent narrative system shaped by socio-political conditions, institutional environments, and moral economies. By centering producer

narratives and incorporating exploratory consumer perspectives within a qualitative comparative approach, the study critically reveals that sustainability meanings, marketing practices, and audience reception dynamics are constructed differently across Palestine and Greece, reflecting fundamentally divergent logics of legitimacy, responsibility, and continuity.

The findings establish a clear and consequential contrast. In Greece, sustainability operates primarily as a mechanism of market legitimacy, embedded within certification regimes, regulatory compliance, and export-oriented strategies, where narratives signal credibility and conformity with institutional expectations. In Palestine, it is articulated as a narrative of continuity, moral responsibility, resilience, and attachment to land, deriving meaning through ethical commitment, intergenerational stewardship, and the capacity to endure under persistent political and economic constraint. Exploratory consumer findings substantially suggest that these narrative logics are received differently across audiences: certification-driven claims resonate in regulated markets, while moral and place-based narratives gain traction among culturally proximate consumers. Critically, sustainability narratives are not interchangeable across contexts but are deeply embedded in local histories, power structures, lived experiences, and audience evaluative frameworks.

By integrating sustainability marketing, narrative analysis, and moral economy perspectives, this study substantially advances a nuanced theoretical understanding of sustainability in SMEs. It challenges dominant frameworks that privilege standardized indicators and purely consumer-centric or producer-centric interpretations, emphasizing instead the importance of meaning construction, ethical logics, contextual embeddedness, and relational dynamics between producers and audiences. The findings decisively contribute to ongoing debates by illustrating how sustainability is actively negotiated and narrated by producers under varying institutional and socio-political conditions, and how these narratives are received by diverse consumer segments. The study further provides five testable propositions that offer a clear pathway for future empirical validation across different agri-food sectors and institutional settings.

From a practical perspective, the results unequivocally underscore the limitations of one-size-fits-all sustainability strategies. For SMEs, effective sustainability communication requires careful alignment with local realities, ethical commitments, institutional constraints, and target audience expectations rather than the uncritical adoption of externally imposed models. For policymakers, sustainability frameworks must be flexible and context-sensitive, recognizing diverse pathways through which sustainability is enacted, particularly in small-scale and resource-constrained agri-food systems. For marketers, understanding audience evaluative frameworks—whether certification-driven or solidarity-based—is essential for crafting resonant narratives. Ultimately, this study provides a robust, empirically grounded foundation for rethinking sustainability marketing as a contextually embedded, morally inflected, and narratively constructed practice.

Statement on the Use of Generative AI

The authors confirm that Generative AI tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript solely for language editing and stylistic refinement. Specifically, QuillBot was employed to enhance the clarity, grammar, and readability of the text. All intellectual contributions, including research design, data collection and analysis, theoretical framing, interpretation of findings, and conclusion formulation, were carried out by the human authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and ethical integrity of the submitted work. No AI tool was used to generate research ideas, fabricate data, or replace the intellectual input of the authors.

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