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Consumer Responses to Sustainable Product Branding Strategies: A

Literature Review and Future Research Agenda

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Purpose: This literature review aims to synthesise the research on various sustainable product branding activities and their impact on consumer responses to sustainable products and brands.

Design/methodology/approach: This literature review is semi-systematic and can be classified as a domain-based review. The search strategy was systematic and well-defined.

Findings: The authors identified four themes: building brand equity, brand communication, product development and third-party labels and ratings, within the sustainable product branding activities that influence consumers’ responses to sustainable products and brands. The study’s findings revealed diverse, and not always favourable, types of behavioural and attitudinal responses from consumers. As for the positive consumer responses, the authors found positive attitudes towards brands, willingness to pay a premium price and positive word-of-mouth intentions. As for the negative consumer responses, the authors found perceived greenwashing, negative brand evaluations and resistance to sustainable products with unfamiliar third-party labels. Several future research propositions and implications for research and practice are discussed.

Originality: Despite the large number of studies that look at sustainable branding strategies, there is a gap in terms of synthesising the knowledge on consumer responses to sustainable product branding strategies. This paper intends to fill this gap.

Keywords: Literature review, Consumer behaviour, Sustainable product branding, Strategy
1. Introduction

More than 90% of the world’s largest firms apply various sustainability strategies and diligently communicate them to consumers and stakeholders (KPMG International, 2020). Marketing departments use various sustainable product branding strategies to respond to sustainability goals and promote sustainable consumption with presumably lower levels of negative environmental and social consequences (Shaw and Newholm, 2002). As the trend towards sustainability grows, one may ask how sustainable branding strategies are influencing the way consumers evaluate and react to brands and products.

There exist various literature reviews that were conducted within the areas of branding, consumers, and sustainability, e.g., Ishaq and Di Maria (2020), Agudelo et al. (2019) and Bangsa and Schlegelmilch (2020), however, no literature review has yet investigated consumer responses to sustainable product branding strategies. The interrelated influences of product branding and sustainability strategies on consumer responses therefore warrant a closer look.

Our literature review is different from previous literature review studies in three ways. First, the scope is limited to “sustainability-related” branding. Second, the focus is on understanding consumer responses to sustainable product branding. Therefore, we look only at the sustainability product branding strategies that have a clear and direct impact on the consumer behaviour and response. Third, we look particularly into the “product” branding strategies that differ from firm-level branding strategies and thus focus only on sustainable branded products and exclude services and general product categories. This literature review is the first to synthesise the current knowledge on the important topic of consumer responses in terms of attitudes and behaviours to sustainable product branding strategies. The specific research questions of this review are 1) Which sustainable product branding strategies influence consumers’ responses to products? What are the moderators and mediators of this
impact? 2) In general, do sustainable product branding strategies always improve consumer evaluations of sustainable products and brands, or can negative responses also be expected?

1.1. Branding

While a universal definition is lacking, the essence of a brand is commonly related to the values and associations that the brand creates in the minds of consumers (Meenaghan, 1995). Within the branding literature, product branding has traditionally been the dominating perspective (Xie and Boggs, 2006). In product branding, the focus is on the features and brand identities related to specific products (Xie and Boggs, 2006), i.e. with the individual products being promoted. It is important to note that the focus of this article is on “product” branding strategies.

1.2. Sustainability

Social and environmental sustainability actions have become mandated by the increasing number of policies and goals set by the UN (the Sustainable Development Goals), the EU commission (the Green Deal), or other policymakers around the world (European Commission, 2019; Swedish Government, 2013; United Nations, 2015). Over time, sustainability has been labelled under prosocial, ethical, green, socially and environmentally responsible strategies (Luchs et al., 2010; White et al., 2019).

There have been a number of literature reviews in the context of sustainability. These reviews cover the definitions and theories related to the concept of sustainability (Agudelo et al., 2019), the impact of sustainable strategies of firms on their performance (Morioka and de Carvalho, 2016), sustainable consumer behaviour (Trudel, 2019) and the link between sustainable product attributes and consumer decision-making (Bangsa and Schlegelmilch,
Looking at earlier literature reviews, there is a gap for syntheses studies that investigate sustainable product branding strategies as the antecedents of consumers’ attitudes and behaviours. Our paper aims to synthesise the research on sustainable product branding strategies and their influence on consumer responses and reactions to products.

Our literature review helps researchers and (marketing) managers to better understand: 1) different sustainable product branding strategies that have been studied so far, 2) consumer responses to sustainable products and brands in terms of their evaluations/attitudes and behaviour, and 3) future research avenues for advancing sustainable product branding strategies and improving the responses of consumers to sustainable products. While the first research question investigates company efforts as antecedents of consumer responses to sustainable products, the second research question investigates the variety of consumer reactions to those antecedents, specifically under a valence continuum of positive to negative attitudes and behaviours.

2. Methodology

Our literature review follows established procedures of Snyder (2019) and Paul and Criado (2020) in four general phases: the design, conducting of the review, analysis and writing.

2.1. Design of the review

We applied a systematic and well-defined approach of Snyder (2019) for search and data collection. The first step of the review process entailed a search of existing literature reviews on the topic of sustainability and product branding. This search identified a review on the role of sustainability in brand equity, i.e., Ishaq and Di Maria (2020). However, no literature review
was identified that addresses how sustainable product branding strategies influence consumer responses to brands.

The next step of the review process entailed defining inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were related to (1) selected keywords, (2) language, (3) type of text, (4) selected journals, (5) timespan. We identified the keywords ‘sustainab*’ (to include variations such as sustainability, sustainable), product, brand and consumer. We also included different similar wordings that might be used to refer to sustainability, e.g., green, social and environmental responsible/friendly. Therefore, the full search entailed the following keywords: (sustainab* AND product AND brand AND consumer) OR (green AND product AND brand AND consumer) OR (eco-friendly AND product AND brand AND consumer) OR (social*responsible AND product AND brand AND consumer) OR (ethical AND product AND brand AND consumer). Any qualitative or quantitative research article published in English between 2000-2020 were included. To make sure that high quality papers were included in the review, we decided to include papers from journals included in the Academic Journal Guide (AJG) (any ranking). This guide covers more than 1,500 journal titles.

2.2. Conducting the review

The search was conducted in June 2020, using the Web of Science Core Collection on the abstract, title, keywords and keywords plus (supplied by the author(s) and “tags” of the main and sub-topics of a paper's content). The original search identified 289 research papers from 50 journals listed in the AJG. This number of journals is substantially more than the number that is usually advised for a literature review (ten to twenty according to Paul and Criado, 2020). This helped our review to derive a more robust list of results.
Next, three of the authors reviewed the initial findings. The aim of this review was to ensure that only papers related to product branding, branded products (not general product categories such as bioplastics and not services such as hotels/places) and sustainability were included. We removed conceptual papers from our analysis, as we were interested in empirical evidence on the topic at hand. To determine which papers to include, two authors reviewed the papers and independently coded them while carefully documenting the process following Snyder’s (2019) guidelines. Next, the two authors compared the codes and the third author reviewed and resolved any disagreements. The fourth author was responsible for writing the results. This process resulted in including a final set of 37 papers in our analysis.

2.3. Analysis

The analysis was conducted using a semi-systematic approach (Snyder, 2019) that is classified as a domain-based review according to Paul and Criado (2020). This approach focuses on synthesising the findings of the papers and the themes of the findings (Snyder, 2019).

The papers were divided between the three authors who were each responsible for extracting the relevant data from each article and summarising it under the relevant heading. As for the domain-based review (Paul and Criado, 2020), the purpose of this process was to identify various themes within the topic of sustainable product branding strategies. The specific themes presented in the results part of the paper thus emerged during the coding process. Whenever a reviewer was unsure about the coding of a paper, it was discussed with the other two reviewers to ensure that it was coded under the most appropriate heading. Further, a fourth author was invited to add a new perspective on the analyses and the conclusions drawn from the synthesised findings.
3. Results

Our literature review revealed four major themes regarding sustainable product branding strategies that have direct impacts on consumer responses (attitudes and behaviours). These major themes are (green) brand equity, brand communication, product development and third-party labels and ratings. Our review revealed that non-brand-related factors also play a role in the impact of sustainable product branding strategies on consumer responses to sustainable products, brands and firms (Figure 1). Appendix 1 (available in supplementary material online) summarises our findings and links them to related literature.

Furthermore, we have summarised the frequency of articles in different journals included in our review in Table 1. The years of publishing the articles is shown in Figure 2.

Additional analysis of our data on the countries of the studies (Appendix 2) and the methodology of the research of these studies (Appendix 3) are available as supplementary material online.

Next, we investigate our findings in terms of the details of different product branding strategies that have an impact on consumer responses and how they do so. The outer circle in Figure 1 summarises the content of this section.
3.1. The themes of sustainable product branding strategies that impact consumer responses

3.1.1. (Green) Brand equity

Extant research points to a relationship between brands and their ability to influence sustainable consumption. Studies often relate the concept of brand equity, which can be explained as “the added value with which a given brand endows a product” (Farquhar, 1989, p. 24), to positive consumer responses such as consumption (e.g. Reinders and Bartels, 2017). However, the relationship between brand equity and consumer purchase intentions can be explained with different mediators, depending on the type of product. For example, in food products, focusing on animal welfare, taste and food safety mediate the relationship with purchase intentions (Legendre and Coderre, 2018). Brand identification is another possible mediator, as it has been found to partially mediate the relationship between brand equity and consumption in the food sector (Reinders and Bartels, 2017).

An important concept that has emerged in sustainable product branding studies is green brand equity. Chen (2010, p. 310) defines green brand equity as “a set of brand assets and liabilities about green commitments and environmental concerns linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service.” Thus, compared to the concept of brand equity, the added value of green brand equity is due to the environmental concern of the brand. Green brand equity has been found to have a positive effect on consumer purchase intentions (Akturan, 2018; Konuk et al., 2015). This effect may be slightly higher in high-involved products (e.g. refrigerators) than in low-involved products (e.g. tissue paper) (Akturan, 2018).

In addition to purchase intentions, studies have highlighted other desirable consumer responses for green brand equity, such as word-of-mouth intentions and willingness to pay.
Green brand equity influences the accepted price-level of the products for consumers, leading to consumers’ willingness to pay premium prices for branded green/sustainable products (Konuk et al., 2015; Li et al., 2016).

Antecedents to green brand equity

Studies have shown that green brand equity is subject to various antecedents. For example, it is influenced by brand credibility, green associations (Akturan, 2018), green satisfaction (i.e. satisfaction about sustainable activities of the firm), green trust (i.e. a belief or expectation that a product, service, or brand will perform well in terms of its environmental performance), credibility, benevolence, and green brand image (Konuk et al., 2015; Chen, 2010). The impact of green brand image on green brand equity is mediated by green satisfaction (Chen, 2010) and trust (Chen, 2010; Butt et al., 2017). It is important to note that companies need to convince consumers that they are committed to social and environmental concerns and prioritise sustainable ideals rather than financial outcomes. If this is the case, consumers tend to be more likely to trust the brand (Kennedy et al., 2016), which in turn translates into brand loyalty and willingness to pay premium (Perrini et al., 2010).

3.1.2. Brand communication

Greenwashing

Existing research points to the impact of greenwashing, i.e. “disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image” (Akturan, 2018, p.809). Greenwashing has been found to negatively affect green brand associations and brand credibility (Akturan, 2018). This, in turn, has a negative effect on both green brand equity and purchase intentions, an effect that is stronger on high-involved products compared to low-involved products (Akturan, 2018). An antecedent of perceived greenwashing is apparent false
claims in ads that lead to negative consumer responses, while vague claims in ads do not contribute to a perception of greenwashing (Schmuck et al., 2018). When consumers have objective knowledge of environmentally related issues, they tend to do better at identifying false claims in ads (Schmuck et al., 2018). Interestingly, when nature-evoked images are combined with false/vague claims in ads, consumers are misled in their evaluation of the brand and its environmental image. As a result, perceived greenwashing is decreased and consumers respond positively. (Schmuck et al., 2018). One means of counteracting greenwashing is for all print materials to include a traffic-light label combined with environmental performance information, which enables consumers to better understand the information and have better brand attitudes (Parguel et al., 2015).

Advertising

Extant research on sustainability in advertisement shows that companies should consider a variety of factors in the development of visual advertising. For example, the valuable role of using a celebrity in ads has been highlighted, given the credibility (i.e. attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise) of such a celebrity (Kumar and Tripathi, 2019). Other studies have shown that concrete messages in ads regarding sustainable products are preferred since they are more effective than abstract messages (Kim et al., 2018). Positive emotional advertising has a stronger effect on consumer purchase intentions than informative advertising (Lopes and Veiga, 2019). The perceived authenticity of cues and messages in green advertising is an important factor in determining consumers’ intention to purchase (Ewing et al., 2012). Remarkably, using nature imagery seems to be advantageous by positively impacting consumers’ attitudes to an ad and its brand (Hartmann et al., 2016). Imagining nature, harmony, and agency has the potential to increase consumers’ sense of responsibility about environmental issues (Garland et al., 2013). Brand names are also of relevance, for it has been
shown that those with silent consonants (e.g. Etopal) rather than voiced consonants (e.g.
Edopal) signal characteristics related to environmental friendliness, such as good-heartedness
and humility (Joshi and Kronrod, 2020). Furthermore, consumers seem to symbolise green
versus grey colour in advertisements as environment friendliness versus environment
unfriendliness. Therefore, using green colour in advertising products increases intention to
purchase these products. This effect can be mitigated, however, if consumers become primed
with being conscious about persuasive marketing techniques (Lim et al., 2020).

There may be differences in how consumers react to sustainability in ads. For example,
consumers’ future temporal orientation (i.e., a personality trait that relates to thinking more
about the future versus the present and the past) increases the positive effect of an ad that
markets a product or brand made with renewable energy on the attitudes of consumers to that
product or brand (Mydock et al., 2018). Further, individuals’ regulatory focus, which
represents “an emotional cognitive phenomenon that explains the relationship between
motivation, self-regulation, and goal achievement”, affects their reaction to ads (Lopes and
Veiga, 2019, p. 552). Specifically, for individuals who were prevention-focused, a negative
emotional communication strategy more strongly influenced purchase intentions, whereas the
influence on promotion-focused individuals was greatest with the use of a positive emotional
strategy (Lopes and Veiga, 2019). Studies have shown that when consumers have “green
underlying values”, i.e. “the tendency to express the value of environmental protection through
one’s purchases and consumption behaviours” (Haws et al., 2014, p. 337), such values
positively impact how they respond to green marketing communication in the form of ads and
public relations stimuli (Bailey et al., 2016). Interestingly, the level of environmental
consciousness among consumers seems to be related to their responses to market messages.
Particularly, environmentally conscious consumers tend to react positively to abstract and
distant temporal ad messages because they positively affect their perceptions of the
effectiveness of a green product as well as improve brand attitude compared to concrete and proximal temporal ad messages (Chen and Chiu, 2016). That said, a challenge to sustainable consumption appears to be related to the stereotypes that it tends to activate. Indeed, “warmth” (Antonetti and Maklan, 2016) and “femininity” (Brough et al., 2016) seem to be linked to sustainable behaviours in consumers. This association may complicate sustainable consumptions, since the warm stereotype does not seem to be appealing to other, mainstream, consumer groups (Antonetti and Maklan, 2016).

There may also be product and brand-related variations regarding the effect of sustainability in ads. For example, when an existing product advertised an eco-efficient version in the form of a brand extension, the purchase intention was higher compared to when the advertising was related to a new eco-efficient brand (Lopes and Veiga, 2019). Further, regarding technology-intensive products, such as hybrid cars, functional green ads positively affected consumer brand attitude, but emotional ads did not produce any significant effects (Gahlot Sarkar et al., 2019). However, for non-technology-intensive products, such as recyclable shopping bags, an emotional green ad affected brand attitude (Gahlot Sarkar et al., 2019). Other studies have argued that knowledge of a brand's environmental benefits is relevant only if the brand has a high purchase frequency and fits into high involvement product categories (Montoro-Rios et al., 2008).

In the context of advertising, it is interesting to highlight the studies that have focused on the implementation of a demarketing campaign in which companies encourage consumers not to engage in unnecessary consumption (Kim et al., 2018). Such demarketing campaigns seem to be able to positively affect consumer attitudes and behaviour intentions: attitudes toward advertising, attitudes toward the brand, purchase intentions and green behaviour intentions (Kim et al., 2018).
3.1.3. Product development

Companies’ introducing new green products can positively influence the attitudes of customers towards those brands. The extent of the influence of these new products on brand attitudes is affected by the product type, the quantity of green messages, and the credibility of the source (Olsen et al., 2014). The number of sustainability claims and attributes boosts the belief that a product is indeed ecological and green (Ewing et al., 2012; Söderlund and Mattsson, 2020). The colour green enhances the fluency of processing a message containing a sustainability claim and hence, improves consumer perceptions of the environmental impact of the related brand (Seo and Scammon, 2017). Therefore, it seems that using green colour in developing products increases intention to purchase these products.

When developing new products, a key question is to develop the product as either a brand extension or a new brand. Research shows that at least in the case of sustainable hybrid vehicles, it pays off when they are a new brand (Majid and Russell, 2015). Hybrid vehicles decrease in value faster compared to vehicles that are non-hybrid. New, stand-alone hybrid brands, such as the Prius, retain value to a greater extent than those vehicles that are extensions of an existing brand. Further, these stand-alone hybrid brands are less vulnerable to “the threat of obsolescence from technological innovations” (Majid and Russell, 2015, p. 994). In the context of luxury products, previous studies suggest that making a new sustainable luxury product that is not similar to a previous luxury product negatively impacts luxury brand evaluation compared to making a new sustainable luxury product similar to the company's luxury product. This negative effect occurs when consumers have relatively high (vs. low) luxury brand knowledge and when the product is durable (vs. ephemeral) (De Angelis et al., 2017).
Sustainability attributes of products are important for the purchase decisions when self-serving motives are fulfilled. However, when self-serving motives were not fulfilled, the influence of the sustainability attributes of products on consumers' purchase intentions was less strong than when their self-serving motives were fulfilled (high price and well-known brand) (Schuitema and De Groot, 2015). To increase positive brand evaluations, congruity is the key. It has been shown that the congruity between a product’s ethical attributes and brand concept influences brand evaluation positively (Tofghi et al., 2020).

The attempt for brands to use bio-based materials in their products as a means of differentiation may not be a successful strategy from a consumer perspective. Rather, only those brands that were based on 100% bio-materials gained increased purchase intentions (Reinders and Bartels, 2017). The type of branding, i.e. private versus national, seems to change the impact of sustainable attributes on brand evaluation. The sustainable attributes of a product with a private brand and not a national brand improve (lower) brand evaluations when there exist cues that signal the higher (lower) quality of that product (Bodur et al., 2016).

3.1.4. Third-party labels and ratings

Different studies on branding of sustainable products have focused on third-party ratings, such as fair trade. Findings have pointed to positive consumer perceptions of organic and fair-trade labels, unless such labels are unfamiliar or related to general claims (e.g. ‘climate friendly) (Sirieix et al., 2013). Other research shows that consumers’ brand loyalty and environmental concerns affect how they react to such environmental ratings (Kwon et al., 2016). Three key determinants of fair-trade brand loyalty have been identified: ethical consumption values, fair-trade product beliefs, and fair-trade corporate evaluation (Kim et al., 2010). Comparing organic and fair-trade branded food products, studies have shown that consumers are more loyal to organic brands and find their price more indicative of quality (van
Herpen et al., 2012). For fair-trade brands (but not for organic brands), number of facings increases market share. Similarly, the price difference with the leading brand is important in the sales of fair-trade brands but not for organic brands (van Herpen et al., 2012). Looking at coffee products, De Pelsmacker et al. (2005) found that the fair-trade labelling of coffee is the most preferred type of sustainability labelling.

In the context of co-branding between a commercial corporate brand and a fair-trade labelling organisation, it appears that the perceived similarity of the brands greatly affected the co-branding congruency. This congruence (i.e., that the association is considered relevant and expected by consumers) is an important indicator of the success of the co-branded product, as it influences consumer evaluations (Sénéchal et al., 2014). However, where the two partner brands are considered dissimilar, the prior brand attitude of consumers seems to lose its importance in evaluating those brand alliances (Sénéchal et al., 2014).

3.2. Non-branding factors: Individual characteristics

Consumers’ individual characteristics and traits may need to be considered in relation to sustainable product branding strategies. For example, individual characteristics such as consumer concern for environmental values (Butt et al., 2017), their general attitude toward green products (Butt et al., 2017), level of environmental consciousness (Chen and Chiu, 2016), feelings of guilt (Newman and Trump, 2017), consumer involvement (Kwon et al., 2016), and environmental norms (Reinders et al., 2017) have been shown to influence consumer responses to sustainable product branding strategies.

There, thus, seem to exist differences in how consumers react to sustainability in brands on the basis of their attitudes, feelings, and norms. For example, consumer attitudes towards social consequences and their self-efficacy (i.e. their self-belief in their ability to succeed in a
task) have been found to be related to their intention not to purchase branded luxury apparel that was made in sweatshops (Phau et al., 2015). Such attitudes and self-efficacy also positively affect consumer willingness to pay more for such products that were not made in sweatshops (Phau et al., 2015). Consumer perceptions of a brand’s environmental friendliness has been found to be positively related to both brand trust and perceived brand value (Punyatoya, 2015).

Consumers’ concerns for environmental values seem to be positively related to their general attitude to green products (Butt et al., 2017). This would suggest that companies’ may want to focus their efforts not only on marketing themselves and their brands as environmentally friendly, but also on supporting consumers’ concerns for the environment (Butt et al., 2017). Further, consumers’ feelings of guilt seem to be a strong motivator for connecting with ethical brands (Newman and Trump, 2017). Connecting with such brands serves to alleviate guilt in the consumer (Newman and Trump, 2017). Consumers’ environmental commitment, their information processing ability, and their level of distraction change the impact of sustainability claims on product evaluation (Aagerup et al., 2019).

Research has also pointed to the role of schemas (i.e. “representations of experience that guide action, perception, and thought” (Mandler, 1982)) in consumers’ evaluation of the social responsibility claims of apparel brands (Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire, 2015). Thus, people tend to process and evaluate new things on the basis of their prior expectations, and these “existing self-generated images” (p. 506) are called schemas (Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire, 2015). While consumers’ existing schemas impact their post-schema attitudes related to marketing messages, research has found that social responsibility messages with high information transparency are beneficial. This is because, in such messages, consumers’ pre-schemas affect their post-schema attitudes less strongly. Thus, when messages have high information transparency, consumers rely less on their schemas (Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire, 2015).
However, it may be difficult to generalise consumers’ characteristics. Indeed, studies have suggested that there may be variations in outcomes based on cultural and product brand differences. For example, it has been highlighted that different countries may vary to a great extent on the effect of brand popularity on consumer evaluations of sustainable brands (Whang et al., 2015).

3.3. Consumer responses to sustainable product branding strategies

The sustainable product branding strategies, under the themes and factors summarised in the previous section and in the outer circle of Figure 1, stimulate both favourable and unwanted negative consumer reactions to brands (the central circle of Figure 1). Here, our review investigates synthesising different consumer attitudes and behaviours under two distinct categories of positive and negative responses.

3.3.1. Positive consumer responses

Various sustainable product branding strategies, such as building green brand equity, increase consumers’ purchase intentions (Akturan, 2018; Konuk et al., 2015) and intentions for positive word-of-mouth (Konuk et al., 2015). Consumers are sometimes willing to pay premium for sustainable brands (Li et al., 2016). The level of consumers’ green trust in brands (Konuk et al., 2015; Chen, 2010) could indicate their brand loyalty and subsequent purchase intentions and willingness to pay premium (Konuk et al., 2015). Consumers’ positive attitude towards brands is another outcome of product branding that influences purchase intentions for sustainable products (Kim et al., 2018). While including nature-evoking images (Hartmann et al., 2016), green colour (Seo and Scammon, 2017), or credible celebrity (Kumar and Tripathi, 2019) in advertising is usually associated with positive consumer reactions, such as positive attitude towards brands and increased purchase intentions, other factors are shown to play roles
too. Factors such as consumers’ regulatory focus (Lopes and Veiga, 2019), temporal focus (Mydock et al., 2018), and environmental knowledge and values (Schmuck et al., 2018) influence the way consumers react to an advertisement for a sustainable branded product. When introducing new sustainable branded products, higher congruity between a product’s ethical attributes and brand concept can result in a more positive consumer evaluation of the brand (Tofigi et al., 2020). Furthermore, for sustainable food products with high brand equity, taste and food safety cannot be dismissed in the effort to increase purchase intention (Legendre and Coderre, 2018).

3.3.2. Negative consumer responses

Perceived greenwashing is one of the main negative consumer responses that can harm both green brand equity and purchase intentions, an effect that is stronger on high-involved products compared to low-involved products (Akturan, 2018). Perceived greenwashing is shown to be related to apparent false claims in ads, which in turn negatively affect consumers attitudes towards ads and, as a result, towards the brand (Schmuck et al., 2018). Further, when brands use third-party labels and unfamiliar labels with general claims (e.g., climate friendly), negative brand evaluations and consumer reactions can be evoked (Sirieix et al., 2013). In this case, companies may face resistance in consumers who are not loyal to the brand (van Herpen et al., 2012).

4. Avenues for future research

While we have synthesised the knowledge on consumer responses to sustainable product branding, we also recognised avenues for future research. Under each theme, we present some potential propositions that can be further explored by future research. In this section, we elaborate on these avenues for research.
To further investigate the (green) brand equity concept and its impact on consumer behaviour, future studies can investigate whether being green is still a point of difference in markets where all players become green in the long run (energy markets for example). Future studies can investigate the concept of “relative green brand equity”, where consumers compare the brand equity of brands that have already established their brand equity as green, and how its antecedents differ from those in the current literature on green brand equity.

One possible research question is to investigate the impact of green brand satisfaction and green brand trust on relative green brand equity. The impact of green brand trust on relative green brand equity is expected to be higher than the impact of green brand satisfaction, since consumers build their trust on prior satisfaction, and green brand trust is the result of green brand satisfaction (Chen, 2010).

Another avenue for future research is further exploration of the impact of product characteristics and how product characteristics, such as utilitarian/hedonic, may impact the relationship between green brand equity and purchase intention. Building on the results of Akturan (2018), one proposition is that green brand equity leads to higher willingness to pay; however, the strength of this relationships depends on the product’s characteristics. For example, the interaction of a product’s utilitarian/hedonic characteristics with the level of involvement has been highlighted by previous studies as an important factor that impacts product evaluation (Stewart et al., 2019). A potential proposition may be that the positive effect of green brand equity on willingness to purchase of low involvement utilitarian products is higher compared to low involvement hedonic products. The cognitive, information-based nature of utilitarian products can strengthen the impact of green brand equity on purchase intention, compared to hedonic products with an emotional, feeling-based nature.
Within the theme of brand characteristics (brand communication), future studies may investigate how different brand characteristics (e.g., brand name, brand logo, visual identity, personality, values) influence consumer responses to sustainable products. For example, previous studies found that consumers hold an implicit association between the concepts of sustainability and gentleness (Luchs et al., 2010). One future avenue for research is to explore the impact of the fit between brand personality (Aaker, 1997) and sustainability/gentleness and how it changes brand evaluation. For example, a brand with rugged brand personality will have a lower fit with being sustainable, while a brand with an honest brand personality will have a higher fit with being sustainable. Future studies may test a U-shaped impact of brand personality-sustainability fit on brand evaluation. In this U-shape association, being sustainable can better improve the evaluation of the brands with personalities that have either very low or very high fit with being sustainable. A high fit improves brand evaluation as being sustainable is predictable and preferrable for those brands while a low fit improves brand evaluation since it may count as an unexpected, but pleasant bonus for those brands.

Within the theme of greenwashing (brand communication), one possible avenue for future research is to explore the impact of the fit between the regulatory focus of consumers and greenwashing information. Based on Lopes and Veiga (2019), we propose that consumers with promotion (prevention) regulatory focus perceive greenwashing information negatively when it is presented in a positive (negative) manner.

The literature on the negative consequences of brand communication and greenwashing may benefit from examining the relationship between product characteristics and greenwashing. A potential avenue for future research is to investigate the role of the centrality of greenwashing information. The centrality of a feature is how much that feature affects the internal structure of a concept (Gershoff & Frels, 2015). We propose that the impact of
greenwashing on purchase intention will be more negative when the information about
greenwashing is central (versus peripheral) to the product’s main functions.

Within the theme of sustainability-related advertisement content/channel (brand
communication), future studies may focus on investigating the role of a product’s
characteristics in terms of its being hedonic/utilitarian. Consumers process emotions for
hedonic products and do calculations for utilitarian products (Kim and Kim, 2016). Lopes and
Veiga (2019) found that emotional sustainability-related advertising impacts consumer
purchase intentions more than informative advertising. A proposition is that emotional
advertising sustainability-related information about brands can better improve consumer
attitudes toward brands when compared to utilitarian purchases for hedonics.

Moreover, future studies may investigate the impact of message characteristics on the
efficiency of green brand communication. For example, little is known about how information
format, i.e., numerical vs. non-numerical (verbal) sustainable advertisement, may influence the
effectiveness of this kind of communication. Earlier studies have argued that when information
is presented in numerical format, the processing is more difficult compared to when the same
information is presented in verbal format (Peters, 2012). Bringing this insight into the context
of green brand communication, we propose that communicating brand-related sustainability
information using verbal versus numerical format may better improve the evaluation of green
brand equity and purchase intention.

Research opportunities for demarketing (brand communication) include investigating the
effects of product characteristics on consumer behaviour, and which consumer characteristics
(e.g., values) influence how demarketing affects brand attitudes. Materialistic values that
dominated consumer values for decades have appraised economics, physical security, and
material possessions (Richins and Dawson, 1992). On the contrary, post-materialistic values
appraise altruism, moral responsibility, and experience (as opposed to possessions) (Kim,
Thus, we propose that as individuals indicate higher preference for post-materialistic (versus materialistic) values, their preference for demarketing communications increases. Moreover, another proposition for future investigation is the positive association of socio-economic status with the preference for demarketing activities. The mechanism for this effect involves a higher preference for post-materialistic values. Nevertheless, a possible boundary condition for this proposition is for products that signal status, such as luxury products, as the preference for post-materialist values may decrease in relation to these types of products.

Within the theme of product development and extension, future research may investigate whether consumers can distinguish between sustainable and non-sustainable products and brands and what drives this ability to distinguish. In line with Ewing et al. (2012) and Söderlund and Mattsson (2020) on the impact of sustainable claims on product evaluation, future studies may examine how the naturalness of product categories affects how the evaluation of greenness of those products is assessed. Several studies in our review highlighted the association that consumers make between being close to nature and sustainability (Hartmann et al., 2016; Parguel et al., 2015; Garland et al., 2013). Thus, when consumers evaluate a product as natural, further sustainable attributes may seem uninformative and not significantly add to the green brand equity or the degree of sustainability of the product. We propose that the level of naturalness of products negatively moderates the association between the number of sustainable attributes and green brand equity as well as the products’ degree of sustainability.

The findings of Newman and Trump (2017) underlined the important role of feelings of guilt in not using sustainable products. On the other hand, studies have shown that the consumption of luxury products is associated with feelings of guilt (Ki et al., 2017). A future avenue for research is to test the proposition that consumers have a more positive attitude to sustainable brands as the luxuriousness level of these brands increases. The mechanism for this
effect is the feelings of guilt associated with luxury consumption that can be mitigated by the sustainable characteristics of products.

Finally, within the theme of third-party labels and ratings, some future avenues for research could be to investigate what drives the commercial perception of sustainability labels and when labels are perceived as being authentic from the consumer side. It could be useful for third-party labelling research to learn if labels can negatively impact the unique character of sustainable products if too many competitors use them, and if consumers get frustrated by too many labels, leading to cognitive overload. The wear-out effect (Craig et al., 1976) shows how a message gets less effective with more exposure, and the scarcity theory (Brock, 1968) demonstrates the value of scarce resources. Future longitudinal studies could examine whether the effect of sustainable third-party approval on sales decreases as the number of products in a category that use the same approval increases.

Additionally, van Herpen et al. (2012) found that organic products and fair-trade products carry higher prices. As consumers perceive price as a signal of quality and value (Dodds et al., 1991), future studies could test whether higher prices for products with and without sustainable third-party approval increase the effect of those approvals sales. Altogether and across all the themes, our review reveals that most of the studies on consumer responses to sustainable product branding used experimental studies and rarely used secondary data (Appendix 3). Hence, one potential avenue for future research is to apply secondary data; for example, real sales data can further enrich our understanding about consumer responses to sustainable product branding.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this literature review was to synthesise the research on sustainable product branding strategies as antecedents of consumer responses and the way these strategies influence
consumers’ attitudes and behaviours towards sustainable products and brands. We investigated
the following research questions: Which sustainable product branding strategies influence
consumers’ responses to products? Do sustainable product branding strategies improve
consumer evaluations of the sustainable products and brands, or can negative responses also
be expected? To answer these questions, we used a well-defined and established semi-

systematic approach suggested by Snyder (2019), which is classified as a domain-based review
(Paul and Criado, 2020), for analysing the findings of the papers.

This literature review contributes to our understanding of consumers’ attitudes and
behaviours regarding sustainable product branding strategies. This review is the first study to
synthesize the current knowledge on sustainable branding strategies at the product level and
how they impact consumers’ responses to sustainable products and brands.

We found four major themes for sustainable product branding strategies, as well as non-
branding factors, as antecedents of consumers’ attitudes and behaviours towards sustainable
products and brands (Figure1). These themes are (green) brand equity, brand communication,
product development and extension, and third-party labels and ratings. Our analysis reveals
that the consumers’ responses to sustainable product branding strategies are not always
favourable. We discuss various positive and negative responses of consumers to sustainable
products and brands and various mediators and moderators that are in effect for those
responses.

Our review has important implications for theory and practice. Our findings provide
detailed suggestions on research avenues that could be pursued in the future to enrich our
understanding of this research area. We outline potential research questions and formulate
propositions under each of the themes of the sustainable product branding strategies. Through
our review, researchers and marketing managers can gain a better understanding of the different
strategies for sustainable product branding; consumer reactions to sustainable products and
brands in relation to evaluation, attitude, and behaviour; and research avenues for improving consumer reactions.

Our literature review is limited. First, by its nature as a literature review study, our results are qualitative. Future studies may attempt to investigate the same research questions on the consumer responses to sustainable product branding strategies through a meta-analysis. Second, our literature review covered the journals listed in the Academic Journal Guide (AJG). Future studies may use an alternative or a larger selection of journals to increase the robustness of the results.
References


Credit line: All tables are created by authors.

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<td>Journal of Global Fashion Marketing</td>
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**Figures**

Credit line: All figures are created by authors.

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**Figure 1. Summary of findings**

Non-branding factors

- Sustainable product branding strategies
- (Green) brand equity
- Consumer response to product branding
- Brand communication
- Product development & extension
- Third-party labels & ratings
Figure 2. Years of publishing the articles
# Appendix 1. Summary of findings and related literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sustainable Product Branding Strategies</th>
<th>Consumer Response</th>
<th>Paper</th>
<th>Brand Activity</th>
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<th>Mediator</th>
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<td>Akturan, 2018; Legendre &amp; Coderre, 2018; Konuk et al., 2015; Chen, 2010</td>
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<td>Brand Communication</td>
<td>Attitude Towards Ad</td>
<td>Lim et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2018; Mydock et al., 2018</td>
<td>Green colour in brand’s ad, Brand demarketing claims</td>
<td>Persuasive knowledge, Type of claim (concrete, abstract), Cognitive style</td>
<td>Perceived colour appropriateness, Individual’s future temporal orientations</td>
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<td>Purchase Intention</td>
<td>Joshi &amp; Kronrod, 2020; Lim et al., 2020; Kumar &amp; Tripathi, 2019; Lopes &amp; Veiga, 2019; Gahlot Sarkar et al., 2019; Akturan, 2018; Hartmann et al., 2016; Antonetti and Maklan, 2016; Brough et al., 2016; Montoro-Rios et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2018; Bailey et al., 2016</td>
<td>Brand name (name consonants), Green colour in brand’s ad, Celebrity credibility in brand’s ad, Brand extension, Green brand positioning appeal (emotional, functional), Green brand equity, Nature advertising imagery, Communicating Ethical attribute of brand, Green (socially or environmentally responsible) brands, Green advertisement, Brand demarketing claims</td>
<td>Type of claim (concrete, abstract), Cognitive style (intuitive, analytical); Green traits, autobiographical nature memories; Perception of masculinity and femininity of green product; Persuasive knowledge; Product type (technology intensive, non-technology intensive); Regulatory focus</td>
<td>Human characteristic, Perceived environmental friendliness, Perceived colour appropriateness; Attitude towards the ad, attitude towards the brand, Brand attitude, green brand associations, brand credibility, Nature emotion congruency, positive autobiographical memory, Perceived consumer effectiveness, Attitude towards the advertisement, confidence in environmental</td>
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<td>Indexical cues and iconic cues, Green message in advertising (abstract vs. concrete), Brand demarketing claims, Greenwashing, Environmental claims of brands, Green (socially or environmentally responsible) brands, Pictures of nature in advertising</td>
<td>Type of claim (concrete, abstract), Cognitive style (intuitive, analytical), Individuals’ environmental knowledge and concerns, Green colour of package; Environmental consciousness, Perception of masculinity and femininity of green product, Expertise with</td>
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<td>Tofighi et al., 2020; Söderlund &amp; Mattsson, 2020; De Angelis et al., 2017; Olsen et al., 2014</td>
<td>Brand attributes (ecological, animal friendly, socially responsible), ecological claims in marketing of products, Design similarity (to a luxury company’s previous non-branded concept, conspicuousness of brand consumption, Ingestible vs non-ingestible products, familiar vs non-familiar brands, Brand knowledge, product ephemerality, Consumers’ perceptions of congruity between ethical attributes and brand, Consumers’ perception of fit,</td>
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Appendix 2

Appendix 2. Frequency of articles in our review across different countries

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Appendix 3

Appendix 3. Methodology of research