Exploring determinants of consumer trust in brands' sustainability claims

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Declaration:

I declare that this dissertation that I have submitted to Dublin Business School for the award of Master of Business Administration (MBA) is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated, where it is clearly acknowledged by references. Furthermore, this work has not been submitted for any other degree.

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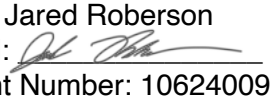
Signed: 
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Next, to all who participated in this study and gave their time. I am grateful for each of you and your willingness to give great insight for the research of this study.

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to synthesise research of green marketing practices of sustainable brands, trust as a concept, and theoretical frameworks used to assess the influencing of consumer decision making as a purchasing decision. The research was conducted in a qualitative framework with participants engaging in semi-structured interviews. Reflective Thematic Analysis was used for data analysis. Themes arose related to the idea of both trust builders and trust barriers for a consumer in a brand's sustainable claims. Brand transparency, brand relationship with consumer, and brand track record emerged as trust building influences, while brand negativity and brand incomplete efforts emerged as negative influences on consumer trust. To positively influence trust in their sustainable claims, brands should approach sustainable initiatives with all facets of the brand, participate in transparent communications about their processes and ensure a positive track record of success in achieving their claim.

Table 1 - Definitions

CONCEPT	DEFINTION	Citation
Brand Trust	A feeling of security held by the consumer in his/her interaction with the brand, that it is based on the perceptions that the brand, as a personified entity, is reliable and responsible for the interests and welfare of the consumer	(Delgado-Ballester, et al., 2003)
Green Marketing (also Sustainable Branding)	Green marketing consists of actions directed to all consumers, and incorporates a broad range of marketing activities (e.g., price, planning, process, production, promotion, and people) designed to demonstrate the firm's goal of minimizing the environmental impact of its products and services	(Groening, et al., 2018)
Sustainability	[Sustainability] meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs	(World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987)
Greenwashing	the intersection of two firm behaviours: poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance	(Delmas & Burbano, 2011)
Trust	an action where in the person doing the trusting is considering the probability that whatever their trust is set in will perform whatever tasks they desire, regardless of their input or cooperation	(Gambetta, 2000)

Table 2 - Acronyms

Acronym	Term
RCT	Rational Choice Theory
VBN	Value-Belief-Norm Theory
TPB	Theory of Planned Behaviour
WCED	World Comission on Environment and Development
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
ABC	Attitude Behaviour Context Theory
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
UN	United Nations
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Conceptual Mapping

Figure 1 is a visual Venn diagram representing the concepts of this research. There are four overlapping concepts, each relating to the overall research of the analysis of consumer trust in brand's sustainability claims. The four concepts are "Sustainable Marketing Claims", "Consumer Purchases based on Sustainability", "Brand Trust: Role of Reliability and Responsibility", and "Consumer Choice". The diagram highlights the intersection of all four concepts and focuses on the identification of the gap for the research. This intersection of each concept into the central question of understanding consumer trust in relation to brand's sustainable claims shows a complex relationship between each concept and a need to understand each concepts relationship with one another to further understanding in this area.

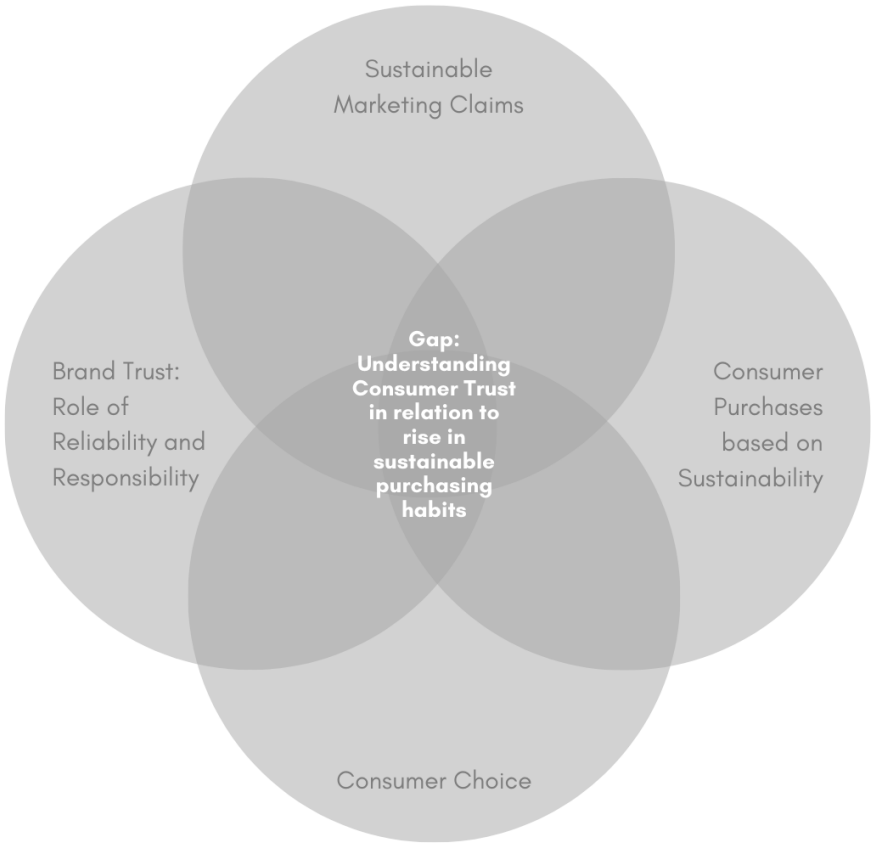

Figure 1 - Variable Venn Diagram of Research

1.2 Sustainability

The use of sustainability as a deciding factor in consumer purchasing decisions is gaining more importance with the consumer (Harris, et al., 2016; Kaufmann, et al., 2012; Kumar, et al., 2017; Satir, 2023; Young, et al., 2010). Research shows that consumers are utilizing sustainability as one of their influences when purchasing products (Deloitte, 2023; Oliver Wyman, 2023; Reichheld, et al., 2023). According to a 2022 consumer survey done by Deloitte, a leading management consulting firm, there has been found a measurable increase in people living more sustainable lifestyles year over year from 2021 to 2022 (Deloitte, 2022). The uptake in consumers identifying with living a sustainable lifestyle is corroborated by data points such as a 20-point increase from 39% to 59% in a consumer's desire to buy only what they need, leading to natural reductions in a consumer's frivolous spending (Deloitte, 2022). Further analysis within this survey shows 43% of respondents are actively sourcing brands that have sustainable practices or initiatives (Deloitte, 2022). In 2023, Deloitte conducted the same research and reported an increase in 11 of the 23 sustainable behaviours they measured, leading to an overall understanding that sustainable lifestyles continue to be on the rise (Deloitte, 2023). Additional research by Oliver Wyman, a management consulting firm, focused on Generation Z and their purchasing behaviours. Generation Z is defined by Britannica (2023) as individuals born between 1997 and 2012. Generation Z encompasses over 25% of the world's population, and a majority of individuals qualified in this generation state they value brands with sustainability initiatives and practices (Oliver Wyman, 2023). Further, research in this area, published in the Harvard Business Review, a management magazine affiliated with Harvard Business School, highlights sustainability as a factor in the consumer purchasing process, particularly for younger generations (Reichheld, et al., 2023). The relevance of sustainability coupled with consumer purchasing decisions is commonly seen in consumer studies (Deloitte, 2022; Deloitte, 2023; Oliver Wyman, 2023; Reichheld, et al., 2023). However, sustainability

when used as a word ‘tagged’ onto a product or a brand is not the ultimate deciding factor in a consumer’s purchasing decision. In fact there is another level of processing from the consumer in trusting a brand’s sustainability claims.

1.3 Trust

The consumer’s desire to purchase from brands with sustainable practices or initiatives as identified in research by Oliver Wyman (2022), Deloitte (2022), and Harvard Business Review (Reichheld, et al., 2023), is increasing in importance. However, there continues to be a disconnect between the desire to purchase from sustainable brands, and the actual action of following through and making a purchase from brands with sustainable claims (Harris, et al., 2016; O'Rourke & Ringer, 2016). Factors noted as barriers to sustainable purchasing for consumers are lack of research, price, available credible information, and effort required (Young et al., 2010). In alignment with the barrier of a lack of credible information on the products, Reichheld, et al, (2023) state in their research that trust is a leading factor for the consumer in deciding to buy from brands with sustainable claims. Consumers not following through with purchases due to a lack of trust in a brand is corroborated in a study which reports consumers overall have a desire to buy more sustainability, up to 70%, but only 1% to 5% follows through on purchasing sustainably (O'Rourke & Ringer, 2016).

In both studies from Oliver Wyman and Deloitte, the concept of trust has emerged as a barrier to the consumer in following through on the purchasing of a product from a brand with sustainable initiatives or claims. Research reports 29% of Generation Z would be more inclined to purchase sustainable products if there was more information available about the products sustainable impact (Oliver Wyman, 2023). Another notable finding from Deloitte (2023) is 50% of consumers surveyed simply do not trusts business’s claims to be sustainable. This inability to engage in trust with a brand is crucial as it is a part of the consumer decision journey.

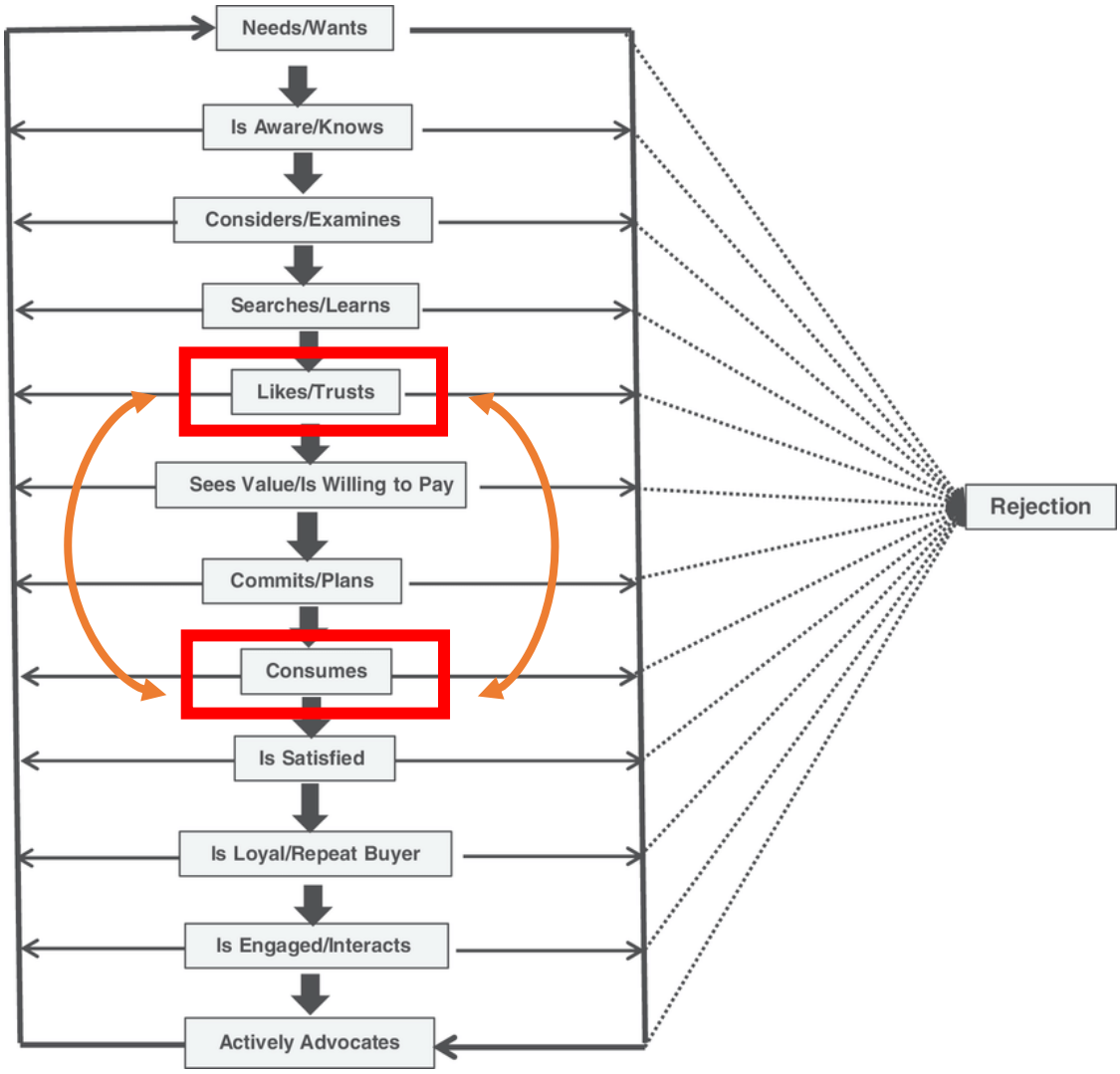

Figure 2 - Expanded Consumer Decision Journey (Batra & Keller, 2016)

1.4 The Purchasing Decision

The concept of consumer trust correlated with brand's sustainability claims is the focus of this research. This is evidenced in the Figure 2 model of the Expanded Consumer Decision Journey (Batra & Keller, 2016). The model shows the steps in sequential order that a consumer takes in their decision-making process of engaging in business with a brand. In this model each step is contingent on the previous step being completed. In the Expanded Consumer Decision Journey developed by Batra and Keller (2016), the concept of trust emerges post the process of consideration, and before the act of consuming or purchasing. This path to consumption for

the consumer allows for this research to focus in on trust as a critical part of the process as due to the contingent nature of the model, if the consumer does not trust the brand, then the consumer will move to the rejection phase, instead of the consuming phase. The 'Likes/Trusts' and 'Consumes' phases of the consumer decision journey model are the focus of this research, whereas other variables of the journey may be discussed in research, the primary focus of understanding for this study is within these two phases.

1.5 Research Aim

The aim of this study is to synthesise research of green marketing practices of sustainable brands, trust as a concept, and theoretical frameworks used to assess the influencing of consumer decision making as a purchasing decision.

1.6 Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To perform a comprehensive synthesis on the contemporary trends and developments in sustainable branding practices.
2. To evaluate how sustainable branding strategies are used for cultivating consumer trust.
3. To identify and explore how organisations can implement policy improvements to positively effect consumer trust in sustainability branding.

1.7 Research Questions

Based on the aim and objectives of this study, the following research questions have been established from the literature review:

1. What are the current trends and methods used by brands when highlighting their sustainability efforts?

2. What strategies and methodologies are brands applying to address consumer trust within their sustainable branding?
3. How can adapting strategies or policy improvements increase trust in sustainability branding?

1.8 Research Rationale

As stated above, the prominence of sustainability being a leading factor in consumer decision making is sharply on the rise (Deloitte, 2023; Kaufmann, et al., 2012; Oliver Wyman, 2023; Reichheld, et al., 2023). With this rise in a new variable of sustainability consideration used during the consumer journey decision making process, there is much opportunity to pursue the link between a brand claiming they meet the consumers new criteria and the consumer giving their trust to that brand and proceeding to consuming that brand's products. Research states that a propensity exists for consumers to engage in sustainably minded purchasing practices, however, a primary agent working against the consumer decision journey process is a lack of trust from consumers in the brands themselves (Batra & Keller, 2016; Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Reichheld, et al., 2023). Embracing the global trend towards increased sustainable lifestyles, this research expands on knowledge and current understanding of how brands establish trust with consumers in relation to sustainable practices and claims.

1.9 Research Additions

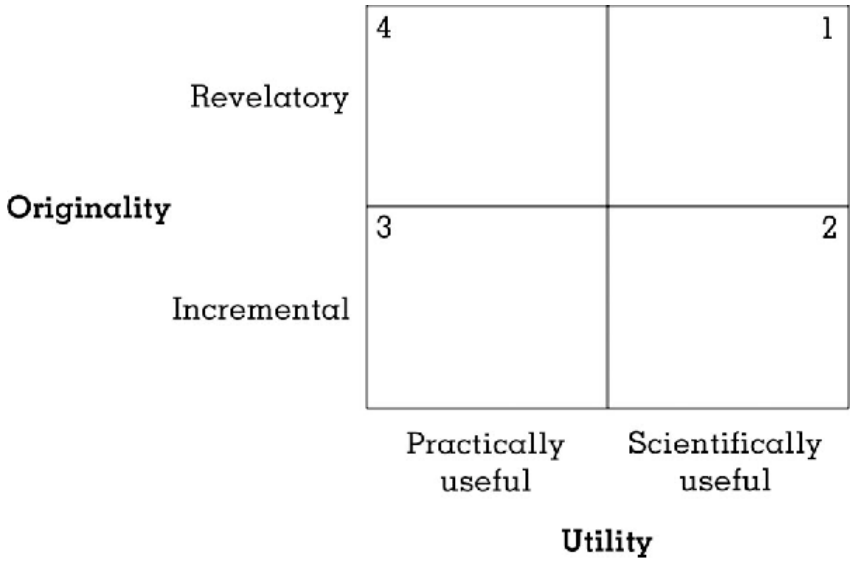

Figure 3 - Corley & Gioia (2011) Dimensions for Theoretical Contribution

To assess this research project's theoretical contribution, the current dimensions for theoretical contributions matrix developed by Corley and Gioia (2011) will be used as shown in Figure 3. On the scale of originality this paper lands in the category of incremental, meaning that it is adding on to existing ideas and expanding current knowledge sets. This research is using established theoretical frameworks to assist in the analysis of the data collected including Rational Choice Theory, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Value Belief Theory and Attitude-Belief-Context Theory. These theoretical frameworks will be applied to how consumers establish trust with brands that claim to be sustainable. In terms of utility, this research project identifies in the practically useful side of the scale. This research being practically useful means that it and its findings can be applied to real-world practical situations. Findings from this study hold practical value due to real-world brands being able to implement insights and knowledge expansion into their branding strategies. These implementations can foster an increase in trust and relationship with their consumers and the brands sustainability marketing. The assessment situates the research project within the third sector of Corley and Gioia's matrix on theoretical contributions; practically useful and incremental.

2.0 Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review being performed is to establish a rich understanding of current knowledge on the premise of the study. The literature review will begin with an exploration of established relevant theoretical models on consumer decision making. These theoretical models will form a foundational basis and provide overall context to the concepts of this study. In alignment with the concepts outlined in Figure 1, these concepts will be explored in depth during the remainder of the literature review to identify the gap and limitations of previous research related to this topic. These investigated insights will aid in the continued contribution to existing knowledge and influence the methodological approach to this study. Academic discourse will take place amongst the literature review through critiques of theoretical frameworks discussed.

2.1 Theory

The following section discusses theories related to how individuals make choices or decisions. These theories are analysed in relation to their applicability to consumers making choices involving the purchasing from brands with sustainable claims. In the process of reviewing literature, it was found that Groening, et al. (2018) have completed a thorough theoretical review of consumer choice theories in relation to green marketing practices. The following theories discussed have all been referenced by Groening, et al. (2018) as theories with relevance to understanding consumer choice in relation to purchasing from brands with sustainable claims.

2.1.1 Rational Choice Theory (RCT)

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is related to the concept of "Consumer Choice" found in Figure 1. RCT has historically been used by economist and sociologist as a widespread

theory to explain how every individual in the world makes choices (Scott, 2000). Simply put, this theory attempts to explain all of humanities choices with one broad idea. In the book, Understanding Contemporary Society: Theories of the Present, John Scott (2000) describes RCT as a theory that states individuals always make the most rational choice for themselves when proposed with options, and this rational choice most always associates with which choice leads to the most financial gain for the individual. Scott's (2000) idea of rational choice being described as an individual weighing options against one another in context of impact on said individual is the core of the theory. An interesting factor of RCT is the recognition that most rational choices made involve a degree of financial prosperity as the top choice for an individual. This can lead to some understanding on why consumers would purchase one product over another. The consumer's choice in the context of RCT is made purely out of financial interests, leading a consumer to select the lowest cost option that achieves their desired outcome. A consumer choosing a cheaper item over a more expensive item that provides the same coverage of needs is an example of RCT in action.

However, RCT has come under scrutiny due to its narrow theoretical approach attempting to be a broad stroke explaining all human decisions (Boudon, 1998; Boudon, 2003; Hodgson, 2012). Researchers have called out RCT as being too general, and even though it is widely accepted, does not mean that it is good theory (Boudon, 1998). RCT being widely accepted is challenged by researchers as they desire to gain a more complete understanding of human behaviour in more specific contexts. RCT has been criticised for ignoring regional socio-economic factors in the decision-making process (Hodgson, 2012), as well as the lack of regard for social-norms and established social structures influencing decision-making (Scott, 2000). For socio-economic factors, researchers argue that RCT does not apply to individuals needing to make the same choice who exists in two different socio-economic categories (Hodgson, 2012). In the decision-making process of individuals in two different socio-

economic categories, there is room for discrepancies in everyone's decision-making process from one to another. The other idea researchers note RCT lacking context for is influence of established social structures. Individuals can take influence from a multitude of outside factors, and when making decisions, their decision may not be solely internally focused as RCT would like to imply. The individual can be influenced by outside social norms and constructs, persuading them to make a choice that would more align with the social constructs and not necessarily for their own maximum gain personally or financially.

These challenges against RCT have led sociologist and researchers into developing greater fine-tuned theories that can more accurately adapt to the multi-faceted decision-making process of humanity.

2.1.2 The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

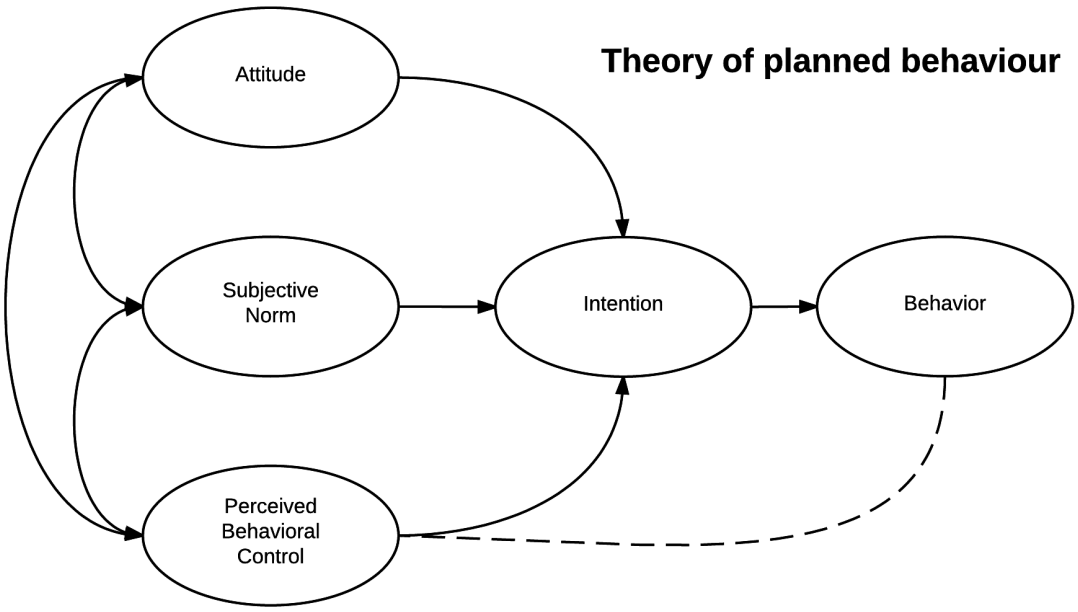

Figure 4 - Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991)

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is related to the concept of "Consumer Choice" found in Figure 1. TPB, developed by Icek Azjen (1991), is a theory that was

developed with the purpose of creating a model that helps predict and explain human behaviour with regard to specific contexts of each situation. In a continuing research effort, Azjen (1991) used the ideas of the principles of aggregations and the theory of reasoned actions, and further developed these into this theoretical model. Azjen (1991) investigates and analyses one of the ideas lacking in RCT of subjective norm, or social structures. The model as seen in Figure 4 is centred around an individual's intention to complete an action. The theory surrounding an individual's decision-making process is not dissimilar to other consumer behaviour models. One factor introduced in TPB is an individual's intention to complete an action. Intention to complete the behaviour has influence on the likelihood of said behaviour being completed by an individual. It is to be noted that there is a linear relationship with level of an individual's intention and the completion of an action being completed (Ajzen, 1991). The linear relationship means that as an individual experiences greater intention to perform a behaviour, the more likely the behaviour will be acted on. If the individual has low intention to perform a behaviour, there is a low chance the behaviour will be performed.

With an individual's intentions set, the Theory of Planned Behaviour argues that an individual's intentions are influenced by three factors, their attitude surrounding their intention and it's consequent action, the subjective norm surround their intention, and finally the individual's perceived behavioural control over their intention and situation (Ajzen, 1991). For the factor of attitude, this relates to the individual's feelings about the behaviour and whether or not they feel positively about the behaviour. A negative attitude towards a behaviour leads towards a lessened chance of the behaviour happening, while a positive behaviour towards and attitude leads towards a greater chance of that behaviour happening. The factor of subjective norm plays into the limitations called out on RCT for lacking context about social contexts. Subjective norm influence ideates that an individual will be influenced by their surrounding community and societal constructs. Subjective norm as a factor in TPB gives outside influence

a roll to play in an individual's decision-making process, whereas RCT looks only internally at the individual's decision-making process. Finally, the individuals perceived behavioural control over intended behaviour is a factor in TPB. Another linear relationship where an individual with a high perceived behavioural control over a behaviour positively influences the odds of said behaviour happening. If an individual has a low sense of perceived behavioural control over a behaviour, it is less likely to occur. These three factors, attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control with the inclusion of intention all lead towards an individual's decisions making process.

This theory is instrumental in helping understand why consumers choose to purchase brands marketed as sustainable. In a study derived solely to identify theories used when discussing and researching green marketing, TPB is a cornerstone theory that ultimately helps categorise the multitude of theories collated into the previously mentioned factors influencing a consumer's intentions (Groening, et al., 2018). TPB opens and highlights the idea of a consumer advancing through phases of the Consumer Decision Journey, such as trust and consumes. The use of TPB in this context shows that consumer purchases are not solely influenced by what the brand itself markets towards the consumer. There are other factors, such as the subjective norm surrounding said brand in question, or in terms of societal norms influencing behaviours surrounding purchasing from sustainably marketed brands.

While giving more context and influence on outside factors, such as subjective norms, on an individual's decision-making process, TPB has been criticised for the theory's lack of influence from the environmental context surrounding a decision-making situation (Peattie, 2010; Groening, et al., 2018) The argument that TPB lacks environmenal based context is of the idea that TPB cannot be applied to every single situation, as each sitatuions current environmental context needs to be implemented in order to gain the best understanding of why an individuals behaves a certain way.

2.1.3 Attitude-Behaviour-Context Theory (ABC)

The Attitude-Behaviour-Context (ABC) theory is related to the concept of "Consumer Choice" found in Figure 1. ABC theory developed by Paul C. Stern (2000) aims to bring in context as a mediator between an individual's attitude and their behaviour. ABC theory takes the criticisms of TPB and theorises that both context and attitude influence an individual's behaviour (Peattie, 2010). As mentioned above, TPB faced criticisms that the theory could not be applied to all contexts, rather than a theory allowing for influence of all contexts in evaluating behaviour. The result of a focus on context in ABC theory in relation to environmental action argues that an individual's actions are influenced greater by the context of a specific issue in context rather than the broad idea of the environment as a whole (Groening, et al., 2018). This greater influence of specific issues defines an individual's decision making as being influenced differently from behaviour to behaviour depending on said behaviour, rather than a broad stroke for all behaviours. Stern (2000) argues that environmental behaviour and actions are complex due to the vast amount of variable and external influences to be considered regarding an individual's action in such context. The author argues that while VBN provides a generalised idea of an individual's beliefs about their environment, this is far too general to ideate what actual decisions said individual would make in terms of environmental action in specific contexts (Stern, 2000).

2.1.4 Value Belief Norm Theory (VBN)

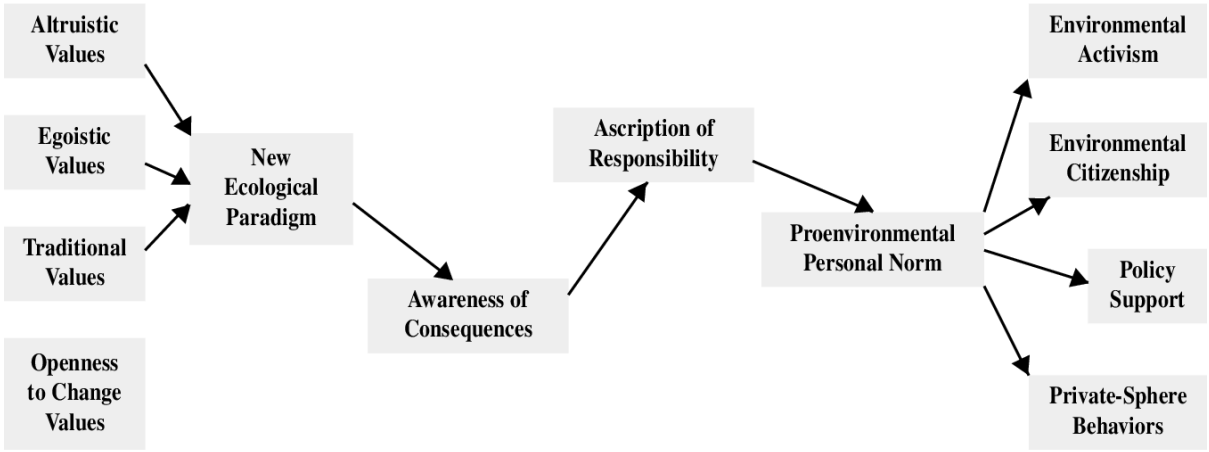

Figure 5 - Value Belief Norm Theory (Stern, et al., 1999)

The Value Belief Norm Theory (VBN) is related to the concept of "Consumer Choice" found in Figure 1. VBN theory is a theory developed to better understand why people act when they feel and believe they are making impacts as a part of a movement (Groening, et al., 2018). This theory is relevant regarding consumers deciding to purchase sustainably to be a part of a global movement for sustainability. A consumer wanting to align with a sustainable movement aligns with the UNs development of SDGs in where the 12th SDG is a call for responsible consumption (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The theory walks through the phases of an individual accepting the values of a movement or an idea, and then believing that those values are threatened as well as believe that if they act, they can make a positive impact, therefore they are obligated to act (Stern, et al., 1999). This theory is key when discussing this research as it relates to consumer trust in sustainable brands. There is a key phase of VBN theory labelled as ascription of responsibility. This phase is the idea that an individual believes that they are making a difference with the actions they take. Why ascription of responsibility is especially important is that it ties into the idea of that if a consumer does not trust in a sustainable brand, then they will effectively not believe that their actions of consuming from said brand will make any difference at all to belief values. VBN theory allows for a better understanding of tying together reasoning of consumers for not buying sustainably even if they

say that they want to. One of the reasons for this is that VBN theory uses belief as a mediator in decision making and if the consumer does not believe a brand actually acts in sustainable manner, removing the individuals ability to actually make an impact with their decision, then the individual will not act (Groening, et al., 2018).

2.2 Trust

The following section on trust relates to the concept of "Brand Trust: Role of Reliability and Responsibility" found in Figure 1.

2.2.1 Trust

Trust can be defined as an action where in the person doing the trusting is considering the probability that whatever their trust is set in will perform whatever tasks they desire, regardless of their input or cooperation (Gambetta, 2000). The person doing the trusting weighs up whether they believe that the person or system they put their trust in will act in a way that is positive for them, and not detrimental. Interpersonal trust is defined as a belief that claims from an outside party can be depended upon (Rotter, 1967). Both definitions of trust highlight that ultimately trust is an idea of evaluating whether an outside party will behave in a way that positively aligns with the wants and desires for an individual. It is important to note that trust in this definition is measured as a threshold and not an absolute, whereas to trust someone lies between the ideas of absolute distrust, and complete trust, needing only a midpoint evaluation between the two extremes for an individual to establish trust in something (Gambetta, 2000). Trust as a threshold is important to note in relation to the consumer decision journey as for the consumer to continue the process, a brands marketing communications only need to push a consumer over the edge of mostly trusting in them, not requiring total trust from the consumer.

Research also notes that trust is especially relevant regarding areas of ignorance or uncertainty (Gambetta, 2000). Due to trust in its nature being the belief that an outside party will perform in a way that is preferable regardless of any intervention on behalf of the one placing trust, there is a level of uncertainty and ignorance in the process due to the individual being unable to affect or predict the outcomes. Trust has been labelled to be a "blending of knowledge and ignorance" (Luhmann, 2018, p.29). Trust as such embodies aspects of faith in one's decision and the release of control over circumstances. This ideation of trust is important to this research as it highlights why trust can be a key stumbling block in the consumer decision process journey for consumers. To complete the trust phase, the consumer must believe that whichever brand they are doing business with will do the things that the consumer desires of them to do. When engaging in business with brands the consumer will not have control over how the brand operates in their proposed sustainable practices, as well as the consumer may never have access to real information that could confirm the brand is engaging in such activities at all.

2.2.2 Brand Trust

As this research is focused on the understanding and synthesizing of what it means for a consumer to trust in a brand, the idea of brand trust itself should be defined. Brand Trust is defined as the consumer having confidence in the brand's reliability and responsibility in meeting the needs and interests of the consumer (Delgado-Ballester, et al., 2003). The two pillars of this definition are reliability and responsibility of the brand. The idea of reliability is belief that the brand will be able to do the things they say they are doing. The idea of responsibility is the belief that the brand will continue to do the things they say they are doing and not just a temporal thing to win over consumers. With strong belief in the reliability and responsibility of a brand, there is high trust between consumer and the brand. This model aligns with the previously discussed definitions of trust. Whereas trust as an overall concept relates

to an individual believing that whomever or whatever they are engaging with will perform in a way that is positive for them, brand trust specifically highlights the relationship between a consumer and the brand. The relationship being one where the consumer acknowledges they want the brand to perform how they communicate they will and has confidence that the brand will indeed perform. Secondly, the idea of responsibility in brand trust aligns with the idea of ignorance in basic trust whereas the consumer trusts the brand will continue to act in a desired manner regardless of time or influence, just as in basic trust an individual trusts without ability to influence or monitor.

2.2.3 Brand Relationships

The impact of brand trust is immense when it comes to the effects of a brand's ability to form a relationship with its consumers. A brand's relationship with a consumer is a valued concept for both the brand and the consumer. The formation and execution of a relationship between brand and consumer is like that of person-to-person relationships between individuals (Fournier, 1998; Kervyn, et al., 2012). Research into what influences positive relationships amongst brand and consumer found trust to be an antecedent or precursor of a consumer brand relationship (Keller, 2012; Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). The forming of a relationship for a brand with their consumers is an important initiative for brands as further research on brand relationships found that relational constructs between brand and consumer often lead to increases in purchases or positive referrals on behalf of the brand (Becerra and Badrinarayanan, 2013). Other positive outcomes of brand relationships with consumers found in research are both brand engagement and brand attachment (Keller, 2012). The formation of a brand relationship with a consumer is achieved through promoting brand trust, ultimately giving value to both the brand with a loyal consumer, and the consumer with a trusted brand.

2.3 Sustainability

Sustainability has been defined by the United Nations (UN) as, “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The following expanded literature review sections on sustainability relate to the concept of “Sustainable Marketing Claims” found in Figure 1.

2.3.1 The Importance of Sustainability

Costanza and Patten (1995) define sustainability as “a sustainable system is one which survives or persists”. For a system to persists means that the system continues to operate regardless of outside influence. This definition is the simplest idea of what sustainability as an initiative is trying to capture; to engage in efforts that support systems that persists, and to avoid systems that do not persist. The original policy on sustainability comes from the United Nation’s 1987 Brundtland Report (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In response to heightened awareness over environmental issues such as finite natural resources, the UN created the World Comission on Enironment and Development (WCED) to research and deliver findings on how the UN can achieve their goals of greater prosperity for the next generations while adressing the current environmental issues being faced by their own generation (Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010). The Brundtland Report by WCED (1987) clearly states the importance of sustainability and sustainable development based on the value and understanding of any future generations needs. Recognizing current environmental cautions being raised on active usages of natural resources and carbon output, the UN put priority on analysing the situation and creating policy to combat current environmental trends (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This UN report by WCED has been noted as the origin of sustainable policy and what continues

to influence sustainable practices globally (Costanza & Patten, 1995; Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010). This influence on sustainable practices has continued within the UN themselves.

2.3.2 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Figure 6 - UN SDGs (United Nations General Assembly, 2015)

The UN continued its efforts in identifying important facets of sustainability and ultimately developed what are known as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These 17 goals, as seen in Figure 6, are defined as the blueprint for prosperity of life now and for future generations (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The goals are seen as a call to action to all nations to strive for in achieving sustainability efforts (United Nations and Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023). These goals are monitored and are annually updated with progress reports each year.

As discussed previously regarding VBN theory, these SDGs are a part of a global movement towards sustainable living and operation of the world. The UN developing these goals and publishing them as calls to action for nations and individuals can give an individual a movement to stand behind, and ultimately become a factor within their decision-making process. This growing importance of sustainability on a global scale from the UN attributes to increases in desired sustainable living practices in individuals.

2.4 Current Trends

The following literature review sections focused on current trends relates to the concept of "Consumer Purchases based on Sustainability" found in Figure 1.

2.4.1 Sustainable Brands

The brands in focus for this research are those that identify as sustainable brands. A Sustainable Brand is defined as a company that presents themselves as doing business for not the sole focus of profit but to operate without any negative impact to the environment, the community, and to society (Spiliakos, 2018). The definition itself brings up the idea that a sustainable brand has goals outside of profit, and this ties into the idea of brand trust of if the consumer believes they are able and willing to achieve those goals. The idea that a sustainable brand is a brand with an outwardly communicated ideation of sustainable practices allows them to fall onto the matrix that measures for greenwashing as seen in Figure 7. For a brand to be truly sustainable they are both outwardly communicating their sustainable efforts and policies as well as performing them. This too aligns with the definition of trust in which the individual believes that the other party will perform the actions in alignment with what they desire. With the consumer's desire being to operate in a sustainable lifestyle, the brand accomplishing what they say they are in terms of their sustainability practices and policies, would give the consumer

ownership of a sustainable practice. This definition will be used as part of the opening of each semi-structured interviews; being presented to the participants in an effort to ground them in understanding of what the research is focused on when it refers to sustainability initiatives by a brand.

2.4.2 Green Marketing

Research on marketing and advertising by brands shows that marketing is aimed to both stimulate demand and create desire in the consumer (Lebel & Lorek, 2008). With the aim of marketing to create desire in a consumer, marketers recognise sustainability as an important factor to consumers in their decision-making process and aim to market in a way that influences pro-environmental behaviours (Peattie, 2010). A company's branding and marketing can use sustainability as a phrase in tandem with other words to create for themselves an identity of social consciousness or environmental focus by the brand. As previously stated, this identity of social consciousness aligns the brand with desirable traits for consumers. The word sustainability as it relates to marketing tactics can also be interchanged with the word 'green' or the word 'environmental'. In a thorough review of green marketing as it relates to consumer-level theories, Groening, et al. (2018) have adequately defined green marketing as:

> Green marketing consists of actions directed to all consumers, and incorporates a broad range of marketing activities (e.g., price, planning, process, production, promotion, and people) designed to demonstrate the firm's goal of minimizing the environmental impact of its products and services.

Even with the prominence of green marketing, it has been noted that simply marketing information to the consumer will not notably change their behaviour (Tukker et al., 2008; O'Rourke & Ringer, 2015). Regardless of recognition that general green marketing may not

change the behaviour of an individual, there continues to be massive efforts towards pushing green marketing information from brand to consumer (O'Rourke & Ringer, 2015).

2.4.3 Greenwashing

Greenwashing can be defined as, "the intersection of two firm behaviours: poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance" (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

As seen in Figure 7, when a company or brand engages in marketing that touts positive performance in relation to environmental concerns, but operates poorly regarding environmental performance, that company or brand is defined as a greenwashing firm.

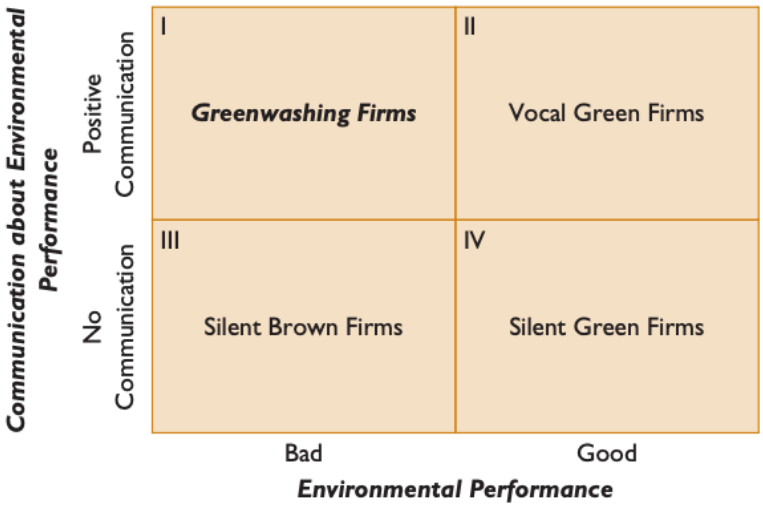

Figure 7 - Greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011)

It has been noted in research that greenwashing has a negative effect on the green marketspace as greenwashing is detrimental to overall consumer confidence in products that are marketed as green (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). One of the methods of greenwashing in practice can be seen in the act of selective disclosure (Netto et al., 2020). As noted in the definition from Delmas & Burbano (2011), selective disclosure is both the presenting of false information about positive green performance while also hiding true bad environmental

performance (Netto et al., 2020). Greenwashing can also be seen as decoupling, identified as the gap between a company's symbolic Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) claims and their actual substantive CSR claims (Walker & Wan, 2012). Greenwashing can be categorised three ways: 1) a company is telling a lie about their environmental impact 2) a company is omitting key information for real understanding of their environmental impact 3) a company is using vague information that dissuades from full understanding of their environmental impact (Parguel, et al., 2015). As this research focuses on consumer trust in sustainable brand claims, the knowledge of greenwashing and its role in deteriorating trust between consumers and brands that utilise green marketing is important for seeking similarities in discussions by participants on how they see brands operate and where those brands fall on the Figure 7 scale based on their discussions.

2.4.4 Eco-Labelling

Research on consumer decision making notes that consumers are more likely to buy products that are labelled rather than unlabelled (Lebel & Lorek, 2008). A method that brands have implemented to serve clear green marketing information to the consumer as well as positively influence trust in their products is with the use of eco-labelling (Peattie, 2010). A chief purpose of labelling is to impart trustworthy information about a product to a consumer (Lebel & Lorek, 2008). Eco-labels are used to give consumers a list of important attributes and qualities about the products sustainability impact and influence them in their purchasing decision (Peattie, 2010). In other research on the process of eco-labelling, consumer trust is specifically called out as being eroded with greenwashing efforts from brands, however, ecolabelling counters this erosion of trust and aims to offer a way to bridge the gap of misinformation and environmental illiteracy for consumers (Rex & Baumann, 2007). However, eco-labelling is criticised with regards to sometimes offering too much information or non-

verified information being presented, leading to a negative effect on the consumer's willingness to purchase, rather than a positive one (Lebel & Lorek, 2008).

2.5 Consumer Decision Journey

The following literature sections on the consumer decision journey relate to the concept of "Consumer Choice" found in figure 1.

2.5.1 Consumer Decision Journey or Path to Purchase

As seen in Figure 2, the consumer process journey developed by Batra and Keller identifies each step a consumer takes in their decision journey or path to purchase in relation to a brand. Figure 2 details steps consumers go through before, during, and after a purchase has been made. The path to purchase for today's consumers has become more complex and multi-faceted due to an increase in the number of ways that consumers get their information from brands such as avenues like social media, online, print and others (Batra & Keller, 2016). The consumer decision journey is an evolving process between the consumer and a brand. This model starts the process at the consumer acknowledging their needs or wants, all continues all the way beyond the actual purchasing of the product and into advocating on behalf of the product itself (Batra & Keller, 2016). The key to this consumer decision journey in relation to this study is the fifth step of the process, trust. In focusing in on trust, the consumer reaches this phase before the actual purchasing decision is made. Figure 2 shows that a consumer can pull out of the process at any phase and reject the purchasing decision all together. Brands are eager to deliver marketing materials that move the consumer along each step of the process and discourage consumers from moving to the rejection phase of the process at any point; trust is another crucial step of that process and it is the focus of this research.

2.5.2 Trust Phase

Within Figure 2, the Consumer Decision Journey, trust is highlighted as a key step being focused on in this research. Throughout the journey a brand will engage with potential customers through communication efforts to guide the consumer along each step of the journey (Batra & Keller, 2016). Throughout the communication process, the brand aims to build trustworthiness and confidence in their messaging. Using credible information, a brand can build trust with the consumer and bring them a step closer to the consuming phase of the process (Berry, 2000).

2.5.3 Consuming Phase

The other step of the Consumer Decision Journey highlighted in this research is the actual phase of consuming, or purchasing, from a brand performed by the consumer. The journey goes on to highlight consumer behaviour post purchase, but these phases are not relevant to this study. The study is intended on understanding why the consumer ultimately crosses the line of purchasing something from a brand, and how the step of trust played a role in that purchase. As with each step of the journey, brands engage in communications focused at moving the consumer along the journey from step to step. For the consuming phase, brands employ communications that promote action within the individual, highlighting messages such as where to buy the product, how to buy the product, if a product is on sale, or other action orientated messages (Batra & Keller, 2016).

2.6 Qualitative Approaches in Consumer Studies

The use of a qualitative study allows for an expansion of knowledge around the researched topic, leading to a more exploratory approach to analysing data (Rørtveit, et al., 2015). Regarding consumer research done by policy makers to inform decisions, there is a need

for greater understanding and a more inclusive review of data sets gathered (Dixon-Woods, et al., 2005). A literature review of studies investigating trust between nurses and patients revealed that out of the 34 studies evaluated, 22 used qualitative research designs. (Dinç & Gastmans, 2013) The research concludes that in review of these 34 studies on trust between nurses and patients, the quantitative research design studies revelations were purely descriptive in nature, while the qualitative research design studies showed interpretivism on both phenomena and theory (Dinç & Gastmans, 2013). To analyse the research question of this study and best expand the current knowledge about what factors influence consumer trust in sustainable brand claims, a qualitative research methodology approach is used.

2.7 Literature Review Conclusion

In the literature review theories on individual's decision-making process, trust as a concept, sustainability as a concept, current trends in sustainable branding efforts, and the consumer decision journey were evaluated.

The theories of Rational Choice Theory (RCT), Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), Attitude Behaviour Context Theory (ABC), and Value Belief Norm Theory (VBN) were analysed in relation to green consumerism. TPB presented itself as a dominant theory of both general decision-making and decision-making regarding sustainability initiatives from a consumer. Literature converged on the idea that RCT is no longer a suitable theory to understand behaviour and is limited by large generalizations that leave out contextual influence. While literature was divergent on what the most robust or complete consumer behaviour theory is, TPB remains prominent in most literature which explores sustainable consumerism. The divergent literature highlighted other theories that gave more weight to specific contexts and social movements raised in both ABC and VBN theories. These theories

will be helping to understand and analyse data collected on why participants make certain choices.

Regarding literature on trust, the literature was mostly convergent on the basic idea of trust being an individual's belief in something being able to act in a way that is beneficial and preferrable to said individual. While convergent literature exists on the scrutinization of trust, the generally accepted definition is suitable for this study as it aligns with the established brand trust scale being utilised in this study.

Regarding literature on sustainability and today's consumers, the literature is highly convergent on there being a measurable increase in sustainable lifestyle choices. This gives weight to the research topic itself in exploring how consumers interact with and trust in brands that are associating with the global trends of sustainability and its respective initiatives.

The consumer decision journey literature highlighted the importance of trust as a part of the process. Without trust, the journey cannot be completed and therefore it is a crucial step. This is important for this research study as the literature review found converging research identifying trust as a key factor when discussing why or why not consumers purchase from brands with sustainable claims. Literature gave light to current trends such as greenwashing and eco-labelling, and the knowledge of these trends will have importance in interpreting the interviews from each participant.

3.0 Method

The purpose of this section is to define and defend the research design, methodology and approach to this study. Elements of the research including participant selection, variables of the study, materials and procedures of the study, ethical considerations, as well as the data analysis process will be discussed in detail.

3.1 Participants

The research population is made up of generic consumers in the marketplace. The consumers will be categorised into a more specific group of consumers who are desiring to, or already consuming from brands with sustainability claims.

The inclusion criteria for participants are consumers who want to, or already are, consuming from sustainable brands. There are three steps of the Figure 2 consumer decision journey that are being assessed in this research: consideration, trust, and consuming. The Consumer Decision Journey as defined by Batra and Keller (2016) shows the order of these three events as consideration first, then trust coming after, followed finally by the consuming step. With this consumer decision journey process in consideration the study wants to include people on both sides of formed trust in a brand with sustainable claims, that is those already in the consuming stage and those still in the consideration phase.

The exclusion criteria for participants are consumers who do not want to consume sustainably. Due to the focus of the study being specific on brands with sustainability claims, if a consumer has no interest in sustainability, then they will be excluded from the opportunity to participate in an interview for the study.

The number of participants being interviewed will be 10. The reasoning for 10 can be attributed to the use of an information power analysis in line with the methods outlined by

Malterud, et al. (2016). The proposed study has the following level of information power in the five items:

1. Research Aim – Specific
    a. The specific nature of the research aim leads to a smaller sample size.
    b. The research aim is specific in that it relates to brand trust specifically in relation to the idea of sustainability claims.
2. Sample Specificity – Dense
    a. The sample specificity is dense, leading to a smaller sample size.
    b. The sample specificity is dense in that those being interviewed are people already familiar with sustainability. Due to the inclusion criteria of the research, participants have either voiced interest or are already consuming from brands with sustainable claims.
3. Theory – Applied
    a. Theory is applied in this research, leading to a smaller sample size.
    b. Established theories surround consumer behaviours and their decision-making process are being utilised in this study regarding a consumer's actions along the consumer decision journey in relation to sustainable brands. Theories utilised are Rational Choice Theory, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Value Belief Norm Theory and Attitude-Behaviour-Context Theory.
    c. Established scales on brand trust will also be utilised to evaluate the responses from participants by using the scaled developed by Delgado-Ballester, et al. (2003).
4. Quality of Dialogue – Weak
    a. The quality of dialogue for this research is proposed to be weak, leading to a larger sample size.

b. The reasoning for the quality of dialogue categorising as weak is due to the researcher's lack of experience in performing qualitative semi-structured interviews. This may lead to a weaker dialogue.

5. Analysis Strategy – Case
    a. The analysis strategy is a case analysis, leading to a smaller sample size.
    b. The research design and methodology dictate the analysis performed on data collected will be an in-depth case analysis of the interviews. There will be no cross-case analysis performed.

In review of Malterud, et al. (2016) information power analysis, 4 out of 5 categories aligned with a smaller sample size being adequate for the study. This evaluation leads to the sample size of 10 participants being established and will be adequate to gain necessary information for the research proposal. As aligned with the recommendations of Malterud, et al. (2016) each of these items will be reviewed throughout the duration of the study and necessary adjustments will be made in relation to the observed needs of the study.

3.2 Design

As noted above the design of this research uses an in-depth case analysis on semi-structured interviews. Reflexive Thematic Analysis is used as the tool for analysing the transcripts of the semi-structured interviews and will be discussed in further detail in the data analysis section. The variables of this study are presented in the next section.

3.2.1 Variables

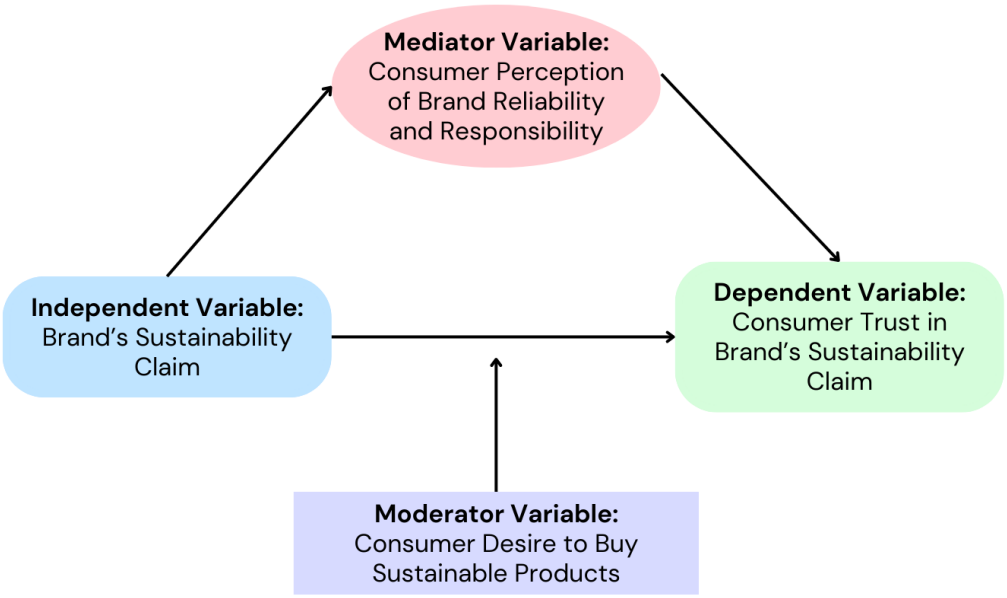

Figure 8 - Variable Diagram

Figure 8 is a visual representation of the variables involved in this research. Each variable relates to the concepts shown on the conceptual map in Figure 1.

The independent/predictor variable of the research study in Figure 8 is a "Brand's Sustainability Claim" where a brand promotes themselves as sustainable. The research will evaluate how brands promoting sustainable practices, policies, and products influence the dependent/criterion variable.

The dependent/criterion variable of the research study in Figure 8 is "Consumer Trust in Brand's Sustainability Claim". This variable of consumer trust will be analysed and evaluated on how consumer trust is affected by the independent/predictor variable of "Brand's Sustainability Clam".

The mediator variable of this study in Figure 8 is "Consumer Perception of Brand Reliability and Responsibility". Participants will be asked about their perceptions of brand reliability and responsibility in alignment with the brand trust scale developed by Delgado-

Ballester, et al. (2003), to inform the path to trust a consumer takes when considering a brand's sustainability claim.

The moderator variable of this study in Figure 8 is "Consumer Desire to Buy Sustainable Products" where participants will be evaluated for their willingness to seek out sustainable products and their desire to understand fully the level to which a brand is trustworthy in their sustainability claim.

3.3 Materials

The Following Material were needed and used for completion of this research study:

- Voluntary Informed Consent Form.
- Sample Interview Questions – Due to the semi-structured nature of these interviews, follow-up or probing questions will be inserted as necessary to gain a greater understanding of the participant's answers.
- Recording & Transcription Device.
- Notepad for handwritten notes by researcher.
- NVivo software for performing Reflexive Thematic Analysis and creating models.

3.3.1 Sample Interview Questions for Semi-structured Interviews

The interview questions for this research were developed from the literature review. Due to the semi-structured nature of this research the questions below are a sample base of which to start with and open the interview for dialogue and discussion. Probing questions will be added to gain a greater understand of each participants answers as needed.

- First, the participant will be provided with the definitions of Trust and Sustainability to centre their thinking around the topics being researched.

- Second, the participant will be run through a scenario-based discussion to investigate their decision-making process when deciding between two products, one being sold by a brand with sustainable claims and one that is not.
    a. Scenarios will pull from consumer decision influences discussed in the theoretical review such as financial benefit from RCT, attitude and subjective norm from TPB and environmental movements in VBN.
- Lastly, the participant will be asked a series of open-ended questions discussing their views on sustainable brands:
    a. "Tell me about a brand that stands out to you, what does it mean to you, how likely are you to buy from this brand?"
    b. "Discuss brands that you know to be sustainable."
    c. "Why does that brand (those brands) stick out to you?
    d. "Do you believe that brand (those brands) in their branding?"
    e. "What makes a brand seem reliable to you?"
    f. "What makes a brand seem responsible to you?"

3.4 Procedure

1. Research Philosophy
    a. The research philosophy of this research project will align with that of interpretivism. The interpretivist philosophy aligns with the exploratory and qualitative aspects of the research.
2. Inductive or Deductive Research
    a. The research will be inductive research design. The coding of the data (to be discussed in further detail later) will be done after the data is collected, and the

codes will be created upon review of the data; that is the codes coming from the data.

3. Surveys, Interviews, or Focus Groups
    a. The research will be conducted using semi-structured interviews. The reason for the use of semi-structured interviews aligns with the findings of Barriball and While (1994) in their research on the use of semi-structured interviews for exploratory research. A notable point is that semi-structured interviews are best suited to understand attitudes, values, or beliefs, giving the use of this process a better chance of understanding what it is that gives consumers trust in brands with sustainable claims. The use of a semi-structured interview also gives opportunities to clarify meaning or dive deeper into interesting findings that would otherwise be impossible in a quantitative study via an anonymous survey (Barriball & While, 1994).

3.5 Ethics

The participants will be provided the attached information and consent sheet (Appendix 8.1 & 8.2). Potential participants will have the opportunity for a full review of the document, including an opportunity for any questions relating to the study. If after this time the participant chooses to be a part of the study they will then sign and submit the form, agreeing to their voluntary informed consent as a participant in the research.

To ensure the highest standard of ethical practice during this research, the principles and guidelines as outlined in The Belmont Report on ethical research with human participants will be followed (The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research, 1979). This includes the above-mentioned informed

consent process, as well as ensuring respect, maximum benefit, and justice for the participants in all applicable means.

3.6 Data Analysis

The data will be analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). The steps taken to analyse the data will be in alignment with the process of RTA developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and further explored by Byrne (2021) in his paper on a worked example of RTA. The research is aligned with Big Q Qualitative research. Big Q Qualitative research aligns with the idea of the researcher using subjective understandings to draw out understandings from the data sets, matching the flexible approach offered using RTA (Kidder & Fine, 1987). This is opposed to the idea of small q qualitative research whereas the qualitative approach to data analysis is more closely aligned with rigid processing techniques where the researcher is looking for a specific answer in their understanding of the data analysis process (Kidder & Fine, 1987). The process of using RTA will first begin with familiarization of the data in a review of all collected data. After familiarization, codes will begin to be developed that come from the data themselves as mentioned prior via the inductive nature of the study. After thorough review of the dataset and the development of codes, the codes will then be collected into themes and bigger themes will be developed to help better define what the data is saying overall.

NVivo will be used to perform the RTA of the data set. Each interview audio is first transcribed and then reviewed for accuracy. Following confirmation of transcript accuracy, the transcripts are uploaded into NVivo to begin the process of RTA. The six steps of RTA were followed starting with a familiarization of the data sets, production of initial codes and themes, and then finalizing the overall themes. With the datasets coded and themed in NVivo, NVivo

is used to develop models and visuals to showcase coding hierarchies as well as dominant responses from participants.

4.0 Results

The purpose of this section is to communicate the findings of this research using RTA as the chosen data analysis process by the researcher. The following section will highlight the steps taken through RTA to develop overall themes of the collected data for this research. Each theme will be expanded upon with relevant quotes from participant interviews that show the relevance and prevalence of each theme to the research. Finally, the data will be visualised using a hierarchy chart and a word cloud to show dominance of defined codes and words used by participants respectively.

4.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

RTA as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) explores and defines a methodology for approaching data analysis in qualitative research studies. RTA is valued for its flexible approach to qualitative data analysis and finds use cases across theoretical approaches, rather than being defined by one approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The use of RTA for this research offers the best insight into developing a strong understanding of this research's collected data sets and applying those understandings to the research questions themselves. In their research, Braun and Clarke (2006) identified six steps to performing RTA. Each of these steps is represented in the following sub-section headers of this section on RTA. Each step will be described in detail and an understanding of how each step was performed during this research's data analysis phase will be discussed.

4.1.1 Step 1 - Familiarizing yourself with your data

The first step of RTA involves the researcher's familiarization with the data set. This step includes the transcription of the interviews into accurate documents containing the content from each interview. Throughout the transcription process the researcher was able to familiarise

themselves with the data sets and begin to form ideas about responses that could be developed into codes for step two of the RTA process. Some initial thoughts noted by the researcher during this process include:

- Many participants spoke of previous instances of trust being broken giving cause for a very difficult journey back to brand trust; citations of brand integrity as important to participants.
- Many participants cited the possibility of transparency into the behind the scenes of a brands operations to give ability to confirm claims.
- Many participants ideated the possibilities of using third party certifications to help guide their trust in a brands sustainability claim.
- Many participants valued the idea of a brand's historical presence in business; showed willingness to trust these brands far easier than newer brands.
- Many participants discussed the idea of how current brands now pivoting to sustainable practices need more time performing those actions to build a sense of reliability for the participant.

4.1.2 Step 2 - Generating initial codes

The process of generation of initial codes was performed using NVivo as described in the data analysis section above. The coding process was started by the creation of three top-level codes representing each of the three research questions of this project. A fourth top-level code was created and used to categorise any potential codes found during the analysis that may not explicitly fit into one of the research questions categories. Those top-level codes are as follows:

1. (RQ1) Current Trends
2. (RQ2) Current Trust Builders
3. (RQ2) Potential Changes

4. (RQX) Other

After the development of all top-level codes, each transcript was thoroughly run through by the researcher and any relevant information was highlighted and categorised into codes. In the early stages of code-development the codes were created subsequently with each new data point being categorised. If when a data point fit a previously created code, that data point was filed into the pre-existing code. These steps are in alignment with the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to develop as many codes as possible to have a wide breadth of codes to develop into themes in the next step. This process was continued for each transcript and led to the development of the following codes as seen in Table 3:

Table 3 - RTA Step Two: Code Development

Top-Level Code	Child Codes
(RQ1) Current Trends	• Brand claims debunked • Brand using 'sustainable' only in labelling • Feeling of 'too good to be true' claims • Inability to verify claims • Negative reviews • Self-regulation of claims • Sustainability as only a portion of business • Sustainability branding as an 'upsell' • Sustainability efforts after product delivery • Sustainable manufacturing processes
(RQ2) Current Trust Builders	• Brand 'integrity' • Current reporting available • Current sustainable practices in place • Environmentally focused brand • Historical practices • Historical presence • Local presence • Positive reviews • Practices unrelated to product • Realistic claims • Supply chain insight
(RQ3) Potential Changes	• Consumer participation • Efforts beyond product creation

	• Holistic approach • Quantifiable data about impact • Regulations on companies • Reporting available • Third party certifications • Track record of efforts • Transparency into internal processes
(RQX) Other	• Being a part of something bigger • Consumer ownership of the process • Improving personal life

4.1.3 Step 3 - Searching for themes

With each transcript fully analysed and initial codes developed from a total review of all data, the codes are then to be categorised into potential themes. This process includes the review of developed codes, rather than the transcripts, with the idea of looking for potential groups of codes that could combine to form themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To group codes together the researcher reviewed codes one by one, starting with the most dominant codes. The most dominant codes were the codes with the greatest number of files and references attached in NVivo.

During the initial search for themes the codes were placed into placeholder theme buckets one by one. As each subsequent code was reviewed, the researcher would identify if the code closely matched an already established group of codes and if the code did align, the code would be added to the grouping, or if it did not align, it would be put into a new grouping. In alignment with Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations, this phase is for the initial grouping of codes into potential themes and the use of a miscellaneous theme for unmatched codes is appropriate.

Table 4 shows the researchers completion of step three in the RTA process. Each code that was identified in step two of the RTA process has now been sorted into potential themes for the continuation of the RTA process. As seen in the headers of Table 4, each theme has also been given a label, identifying the researcher's theme categorization criteria.

Table 4 - RTA Step Three: Searching for Themes

THEME 1 – Brand Dishonesty	• Brand claims debunked • Feeling of 'too good to be true' claims • Negative reviews • Inability to verify claims • Brand 'integrity'
THEME 2 – Brand Incomplete Efforts	• Brand using 'sustainable' only in labelling • Sustainability branding as an 'upsell' • Sustainability as only a portion of business • Self-regulation of claims • Sustainability efforts after product delivery
THEME 3 – Brand Track Record	• Sustainable manufacturing processes • Current sustainable practices in place • Practices unrelated to product • Efforts beyond product creation • Holistic approach • Track record of efforts
THEME 4 – Brand Familiarity	• Historical presence • Historical practices • Environmentally focused brand • Local presence • Positive reviews • Local presence
THEME 5 – Brand Transparency	• Supply chain insight • Current reporting available • Quantifiable data about impact • Realistic claims • Third party certifications • Transparency into internal processes • Regulations on companies • Reporting
THEME 6 – Miscellaneous	• Consumer ownership of the process • Consumer participation • Being a part of something bigger • Improving personal life

4.1.4 Step 4 - Reviewing themes

Step four of the RTA process involves a review of the previously established themes from step three. The purpose of this phase of the process is to give the researcher another opportunity to review each code and how both the data points pulled from the transcripts, and the codes themselves fit within each previously categorised potential theme. During this step the researcher can combine related themes into higher level themes as well as re-categorise any potential codes that fit more accurately in another theme. In this research the themes from step three were reduced into five main themes.

Table 5 shows the newly established themes. This includes the elimination of the miscellaneous theme as well as the renaming of some themes and the reorganizing of some codes into more representative themes.

Table 5 - RTA Step Four: Reviewing Themes

THEME 1 – Brand Negativity	• Brand claims debunked • Feeling of 'too good to be true' claims • Negative reviews • Inability to verify claims • Brand 'integrity'
THEME 2 – Brand Incomplete Efforts	• Brand using 'sustainable' only in labelling • Sustainability branding as an 'upsell' • Sustainability as only a portion of business • Self-regulation of claims • Sustainability efforts after product delivery
THEME 3 – Brand Track Record	• Sustainable manufacturing processes • Current sustainable practices in place • Practices unrelated to product • Efforts beyond product creation • Holistic approach • Track record of efforts • Historical practices • Positive reviews
THEME 4 – Brand Relationship with Consumer	• Historical presence • Consumer ownership of the process • Environmentally focused brand • Local presence • Consumer participation • Being a part of something bigger

	• Improving personal life
THEME 5 – **Brand Transparency**	• Supply chain insight • Current reporting available • Quantifiable data about impact • Realistic claims • Third party certifications • Transparency into internal processes • Regulations on companies • Reporting

4.1.5 Step 5 - Defining and naming themes

Upon completion of step four of the RTA process, reviewing themes, step five finalises and labels the ultimate themes for discussion in this research. During this phase the researcher identified two main themes that each encompasses sub-themes identified in the previous two steps of the RTA process. The main two themes identified in this step are 'Trust Barriers' and 'Trust Builders'. These two themes were identified to be the most dominant overarching idea identified by participants in their responses to interview questions.

Participants often spoke of ways that they have seen already or could potentially have their trust broken with a brand regarding its sustainability claims. The other dominant idea was on the opposite end citing instances where brands were currently doing or could do in the future to build trust with the consumer in their sustainable brand claims.

Figure 9 represents the finalised thematic map of the RTA process. This theoretical map visually showcases which sub-themes were categorised into which main themes.

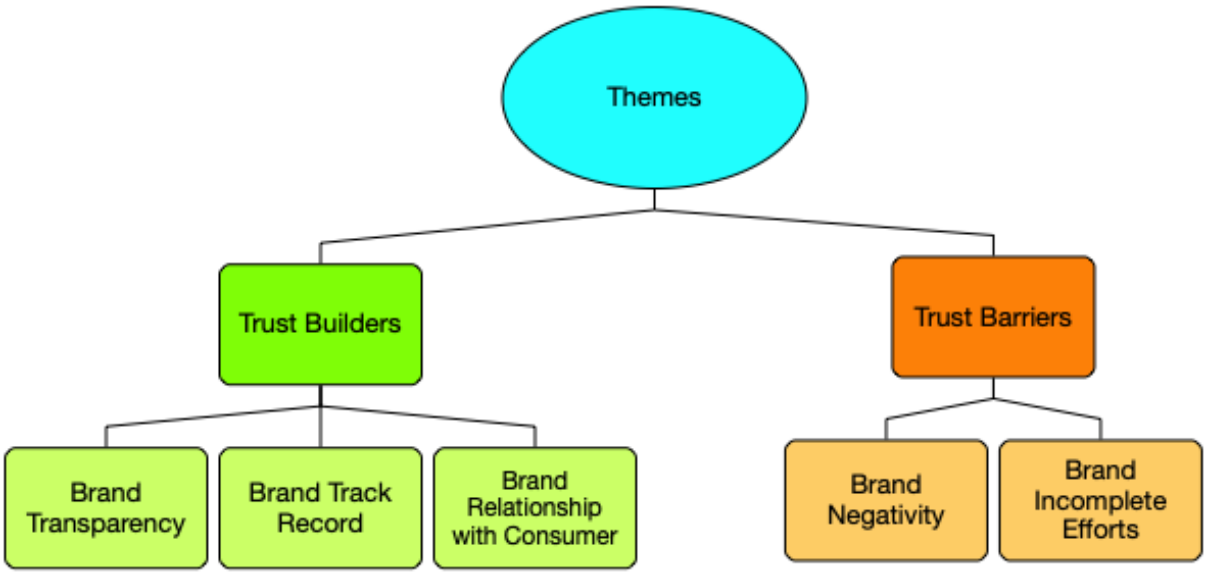

Figure 9 - Theoretical Map of Finalised Themes

4.1.6 Step 6 - Producing the report

The final step of the RTA process as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) is to produce the report regarding the findings discovered during the thematic analysis of the transcripts. The purpose of the reporting on the discoveries made and establishing of themes found in the RTA process is to solidify the results as relevant findings to the established research questions in relation to the research study being conducted. These discussions are included in the discussion section of this report.

4.2 Themes

With the completion of the RTA process on this research's transcripts, two main themes have emerged from the process. These two themes, 'Trust Builders' and 'Trust Barriers' will be expanded upon by showcasing corresponding responses from participants that align with each major theme and sub theme.

4.2.1 Trust Builders

Many participants spoke about different ways that trust has been or can be influenced positively regarding a brand's sustainability claim. The following sub themes of the major theme trust builders will highlight responses in alignment with this major theme's idea.

Brand Transparency

Brand transparency as a theme can be defined as a consumer having access to information about the internal processes of a brand surrounding the brand's efforts towards achieving their sustainability claim. For a multitude of participants discussions of being able to see behind the scenes into the brands operations were prevalent. Another discussion point that participants used to speak on brand transparency came in the form of having the ability to access internal reports quantifying a brand's efforts in backing their sustainability claim:

> "If I can see maybe from like their reporting that they've actually put in the effort internally to change their manufacturing processes then that gives me the confidence"

> "I think if one had more transparency I would trust it more"

> "I know some clothing brands that will even post their manufacturers and the places and the specific companies and names, which a lot of that information is usually hidden because a lot of that is usually not sustainable"

> “So, if there is a brand that is being transparent and it's just kind of laying it all out there. That's like immediate trust for me, because I know that they, you know it does market this position if they have nothing to hide.”

> “If it’s clear they're making themselves accountable, that they have targets, they have, you know, say they're working with third parties here, you know, who are gonna call them out if they're falling short.”

> “The voluntary choice to identify or to acknowledge those shortcomings that are applicable to their industry and then voluntarily choosing to identify ways that they can impact that”

Another participant showed value in brand transparency by stating how a brand lacking transparency has a negative effect on their ability as a consumer to fully know and trust if what the brand is doing what they claim to be:

> “I just ultimately think that it’s kind of easy to claim sustainability when we as regular people and consumers, we're hardly ever able to go put our hands on or go see physically with our eyes the factories where the products are coming from.”

Brand Track Record

The second sub theme of the main theme trust builders centres around the idea for participants that it is important to them to see a brand maintaining a positive track record as brand. Brand track record as a theme can be defined as a consumer understanding of a brand

to have tenured success in achieving their claims in their respective fields. To further expand on this idea participants highlighted ideas of seeing brands that have long been involved in sustainable business practices, as well as seeing brands that take their sustainability claims beyond only product and embody this claim holistically as a brand:

> "I know that this is a company that have a track record of actually putting in these practices in like into all their manufacturing processes"

> "a track record of being responsible and looking out for their people"

> "So I do have a sense that companies who have been like you know I guess have been kind of showing themselves to be operating a specific way for an extended period of time kind of just like the pure lack of scandal is almost evidence of like them being reliable"

> "So, that's definitely something that I see as reliability because it was something that was important to the brand before it was important to their consumers."

> "You're probably always going to trust the company who was sustainable before it was fashionable. Rather than the ones that have jumped on the bandwagon"

> "I think longevity as well is a big part there. Like, are they only doing it for a period of time or is this something that they're trying to do across the board?"

Brand Relationship with Consumer

The third sub theme related to the main them of trust builders is about a brand's relationship with the consumer. Brand relationship with consumer as a theme can be defined as a consumer's feeling of being in relationship with a brand as one would with another person, as opposed to a purely transactional interaction. Many participants highlighted the feeling of having a relationship with a brand as a positive factor in influencing their trust in the brand's sustainability claim.

These ideas included knowledge of a brands historical presence in the market, the use of local brands, the consumer being able to participate with the brand in their sustainability claim, as well as the feeling that the consumer is a part of something bigger when they engage in business with a brand:

> "Basically, the more sustainable practices they put into place, the more processes they put into place, the more even as the consumer you're able to adjust your own life to basically be a more sustainable individual in the long run"

> "They're [local brands are] going to do things responsibly because I can see them. I know, yeah, I know the process. I know the town. I can go visit the town where the factory is"

> "I would put a little bit of prejudice about newer brands that I'm not that familiar with"

> "You get a kick out of thinking, you know, I'm only thinking, I don't know, kitchen roll whatever saves, you know, 20 trees because they're using a different

manufacturing technique. Then you think okay well that's 20 trees that I've played a part in saving"

"If it draws you in so that you feel you're playing a part in achieving a sustainable mission and that might convince me."

One participant especially highlighted the factor of a prior relationship with the company measuring up to their claims giving them easy confidence and trust that the brand will measure up to their sustainability claim:

"I think just on the brand level through that experience, there's a, again kind of that established brand trust, reliableness. And so, translating that into the like sustainability side, because I've seen the reliableness of the product and the personnel. I think there's kind of an established trust that like alright, if they're going to tell me these things in addition to that, like, they've never given me a reason to not believe them."

Another participant explained a way that a consumer can be involved in the ensuring the success of a brand's sustainability claim by being a part of their process:

"Like for a clothing company when they have a section where you can bring your old clothes for recycling and they will use that for recycling that. For making the new clothing, using the recycled clothes"

4.2.2 Trust Barriers

On the opposite side of participants remarks contributing to a theme full of ideas of building brand trust for a consumer, the resounding alternate theme was of remarks citing the many ways that brands with sustainable claims may break trust with a consumer, or even prevent trust from ever forming in the first place.

Brand Negativity

Brand negativity as a theme can be defined as a consumer feeling or perception that a brand is not looked upon by the greater marketplace as a positive entity, often through tangible examples of actions taken by the brand being against their own sustainable claims. Many participants spoke about ways that they have seen brand trust be broken, citing instances of claims being proved to be false, leading to an overall feeling of mistrust and scepticism when it comes to a brand's sustainability claim:

> "documentary trying to lay out over like an hour and a half, how that they're not meeting those claims and they have no way of verifying it"

> "the integrity of a brand is really important to me"

> "often I've seen quite a few reports where a brand or company proclaims some green aspect to their business or their product and then it's to sell."

> "they're trying to make it out that they're more sustainable than they are"

> "I know, not all brands that claim to be sustainable necessarily are"

One participant spoke about how brand negativity weighs heavier in consideration over the historical knowledge or relationship they may have with a brand in that they would rather go with an unknown brand if a known brand to them has a negative reputation:

> "if there's two brands, one of them I know and does not have a good reputation, I'd go with the other brand"

One participant further dove into consumer scepticism by discussing motives behind a brand's sustainability claim. They spoke on the idea of a brand pivoting into sustainability and presenting themselves as a sustainable brand:

> "If they're a company that's always been motivated by profit, you have to ask, 'Well is the move now not also ultimately motivated by profit?'"

Brand Incomplete Efforts

The other dominant sub theme in relation to the major them of trust barriers surrounded the idea of participants speaking on ways that they did not believe the brand to be doing enough to justify their sustainable brand claims. Brand incomplete efforts as a theme can be defined as the consumer perception that a brand is either not doing enough overall to justify their sustainability claims or that they are only presenting a sustainability claim for profit and not for the call to sustainability itself.

> “It seems like, it seems like companies use stability to just yeah to, to upsell a bit, and to try and, yeah, they, they use it to sell in general, but they use it to upsell as well and to charge more”

> “I do think a lot of companies are just jumping on the bandwagon and trying to look a little bit green”

> “So, you know there's brands that that claim to be sustainable or claim to be XY and Z and that's kind of where it ends. If, you know do your research or, you know if you look more into what their claims are you can tell when it's just a bunch of corporate jargon. There's no, you know, everything's really broad terms, there are no real specifics.”

> “Brands will push a certain story or whatever, but, when it, when it's a broad paintbrush of we're sustainable, vegan friendly, cruelty free, brand; cool. But like, what does that, what does that actually mean?”

Multiple participants spoke of concerns surrounding the idea of brands being able to freely claim status as a sustainable brand without much proper regulation surrounding the qualifications for what it means to actually be able to claim status as a sustainable brand:

> **“**Just saying that you're sustainable after you've basically made the product doesn't really make you sustainable”

"I know that you gave a definition of sustainable, but anyone can just claim that. That would be, like what does that actually mean? How can they actually back that up?"

"I think there's a lot of risk there too, that people can just claim they're sustainable even if they're doing a very small percentage of their production sustainably"

4.3 Models

The following figures are visual models created by NVIVO using the analysed data sets after the completion of the RTA process. These models help visualise the data obtained and are further described below.

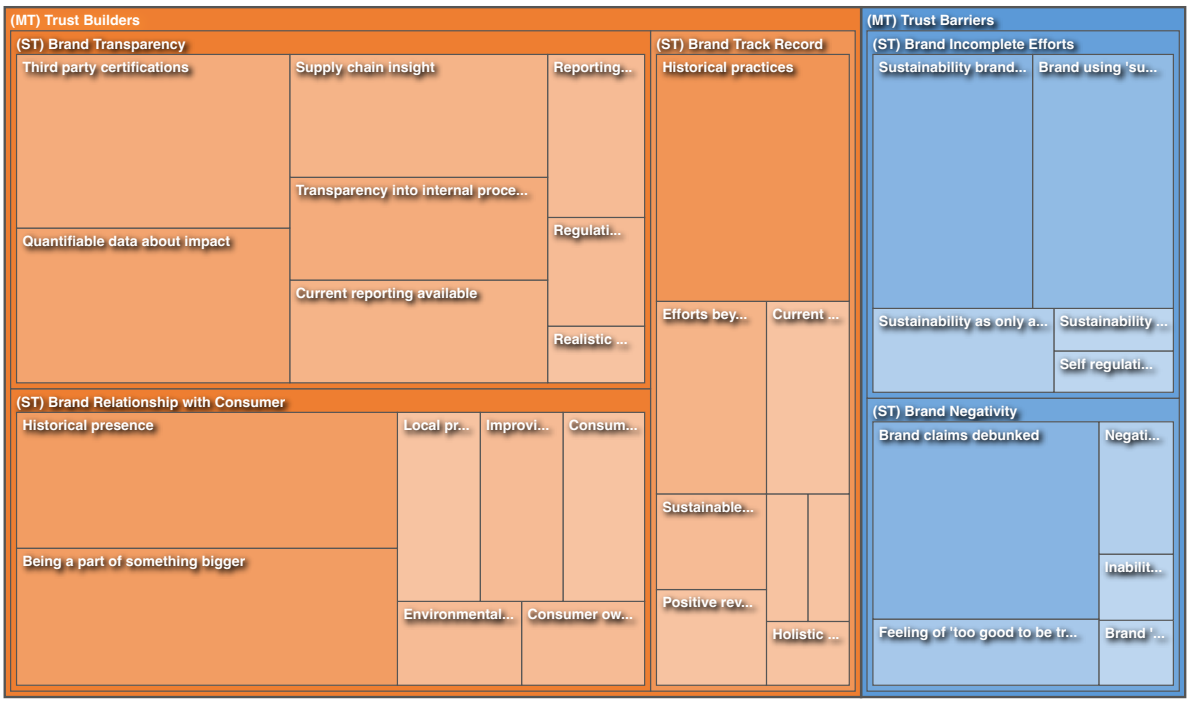

Figure 10 - Hierarchy Chart of Themes

Figure 10 is a hierarchy chart of themes developed using NVivo. This chart displays each of the two major themes, labelled on the chart with (MT) for Major Theme in their headers. The major theme of trust builders is in the colour orange, while the major theme of trust barriers is in the colour blue. Within each major theme sub themes are present and labelled with (ST) for Sub Theme in their headers. The hierarchy chart achieves a visual representation of dominant themes, with their respective dominant codes contributing to each theme. As shown in Figure 10, a majority of the discussion by participants showcased effort surrounding ways that brands do build consumer trust and can continue to build consumer trust in their sustainable brand claims.

Figure 11 – Word Cloud

Figure 11 is a word cloud developed using NVivo that visually presents the dominant words used throughout the entire set of excerpts taken for code creation from the participant interview transcripts. As the research was centred around consumer trust in brands with sustainable claims it is unsurprising that the word ‘sustainable’ came out as the most dominant word used during interviews by participants.

5.0 Discussion

The purpose of this section is to examine the findings of this research as they relate to both prior literatures reviewed and the research questions of this study. The aim of this study restated is to synthesise research of green marketing practices of sustainable brands, trust as a concept, and theoretical frameworks used to assess the influencing of consumer decision making as a purchasing decision.

The following sections will explore the overall findings from the conducted research and evaluate the findings relevance to the current literature and theories surrounding these topics of sustainable brand claims, trust as a concept, and the consumer decision making process. The research study itself will be examined for potential issues or flaws within the research design. Recommendations will then be made for both future research and current industry applications.

5.1 Summary of Findings

This section will explore the themes identified during the RTA process and how each defined theme relates to the research questions of this study. The research questions of this study restated are the following:

1. What are the current trends and methods used by brands when highlighting their sustainability efforts?
2. What strategies and methodologies are brands applying to address consumer trust within their sustainable branding?
3. How can adapting strategies or policy improvements increase trust in sustainability branding?

As described in the results section, the researcher concluded that two main themes emerged during the data analysis phase of this study. Those two main themes are Trust Builders and Trust Barriers. Within each of these two main themes, sub themes were identified that nest underneath one of the defined main themes.

5.2 Discussion of Themes

5.2.1 Brand Transparency

In this study, one of the themes that emerged through the analysis of the collected data was brand transparency. This sub theme is nested under the main them of trust builders as the predominant discussions surrounding this topic were about ways that trust can be built. Brand transparency as a theme came about through the collation of participant responses speaking on the idea of being able to see the behind the scenes of a brand's operations, or actively being communicated to about the processes that a brand goes through to abide by its sustainable claim. The ability to have access and insight into a brand's operation was commonly paired with a feeling of trust by the consumer in that brand. On the other side when a brand was discussed to be not openly showcasing their processes, manufacturing sites, or other aspects of their business, participants connected this with a feeling of mistrust due to the brand feeling as if they had something to hide.

Literature focused on greenwashing in marketing can be connected to this theme through the lens of how the perception of greenwashing erodes consumer trust in a brand's claims. Parguel, et al. (2015) state in their second summation of how a brand may be participating in greenwashing through purposefully omitting key information about their environmental impact, otherwise qualified as living up to their sustainable claim. When participants spoke about a brand giving a sense of hiding information or not displaying a full

picture of how the brand is living up to sustainability claims, they quickly converted that idea to a feeling of overall distrust against brand with sustainability claims.

A positive correlation with trust in literature can be seen in the use of eco-labelling. Label and Lorek (2008) state in their research that a consumer is more likely to buy a labeled product over an unlabeled product, and Peattie (2010) states in their research that the use of eco-labelling by a brand is a common practice to build trust with the consumer in their sustainable claims. This idea of explicit communication about the makeup of the product and sometimes even its manufacturing process on a label coincides with the theme of brand transparency. A participant mentioned the access to tangible information when seeing recycled fibers showing up on an article of clothing's material list tag gave a sense of real action by the brand to back up their sustainable claim and increased that participant's trust in the brand.

Brands with sustainable claims should recognise the impact that their transparency of processes to the consumer affects a consumer's level of trust of the brand. Previous literature as well as this research documents the idea that consumers desire the ability to see the detailed steps a brand takes to ensure the meeting of their sustainable claim.

Brands may act on increasing transparency to the consumer through the use various avenues. These options include a detailed communications effort to the consumer on the production process or supply chain used to create the brand's products, a report of quantifiable data on the impacts being made using a brand's products, as well as full reports in the future on how the brand continues to make efforts towards abiding by their sustainable claims. Any of these ideas that involve a brand freely giving as much information about their processes to their consumers as possible will generate a positive impact on a consumer's trust in that brand's sustainable claims.

5.2.2 Brand Relationship with Consumer

The next theme to be discussed that emerged from this research is theme of brand relationship with consumer. This sub theme is nested under the main theme of trust builders as the predominant discussions surrounding this topic were about ways that trust can be built. The analysis of this research's data showed that the strength or tenure of a brand's relationship with the consumer greatly affects the trust to which a consumer will give to the brand's sustainable claims. A positive correlation existed between consumers that had long standing relationships with a brand, and their willingness to trust that same brand's sustainable claim. A historic relationship however was not explicitly required to exist between the consumer and the brand where the consumer has been a consumer of the brand before. There also showed a positive correlation of the consumers recognition of a brands long term history in the marketplace, as opposed to being a newer brand in the market. Both instances highlighting a brand's historical relationship with a consumer proved to be influences of consumer trust in the brand's sustainable claim.

The importance of a brand's relationship with the consumer can be seen in literature where brand relationships were positively attributed to outcomes such as brand attachment, brand referrals and brand trust (Keller, 2012; Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). The research referenced shows direct correlations with increased positive outcomes for both brand and consumer when the relationships between brand and consumer are strong. These findings mean that that theme of brand relationships positively influencing trust aligns with current findings. The findings of this research compared to current literature show brand trust and brand relationship to have a mutualistic relationship, where increases in one will increase the other. The prevalence of this theme can also be informed by research citing that consumers care not only about the products or services they can obtain from a brand but the relationship they have with the brand as well (Kervyn, et al., 2012).

Brands that are pushing sustainable claims need to be aware of the impact their historical relationship with the consumer has on the consumer's level of trust in the brand's sustainable claim. Brands with a long tenured and steadied history in the marketplace should rely on their history to market a message of trust to the consumer. Brands that are new to the marketplace will find themselves with more difficulty when it comes to building trust with a consumer.

For a brand to positively influence consumer trust in their sustainable claim using a historical relationship with the consumer, the brand should look at a holistic approach to engaging with the consumer. This means that the brand should not only be focused just on building trust in their sustainable claim but on their entire business's claim. This idea relates to how one participant spoke on the idea of already experiencing a brand live up to their claims in areas such as product quality and customer service. The participant noted that if the brand then presented that they were acting sustainably, the participant would have no reason to not believe in the claim due to the proof of the brand already meeting their claims in other areas. Brands can and should begin to build a historical relationship with the consumer and positively influence trust in their sustainable claim.

5.2.3 Brand Track Record

The last sub theme nested under the main theme of trust builders is the theme of brand track record. The research pointed many times to a consumer desire to see a historical record indicating the brands intention and action in their sustainable claim. Brands that showcase a consistent historical practice of engaging in sustainable initiatives and environmental consciousness greatly increase the perception of trust for the consumer in the brand's sustainable claim.

Literature reviewed in this research study can be connected to the idea of a brand having a track record to the use of the brand trust scale developed by Delgado-Ballester, et al. (2003). Within this scale on brand trust one of the main two factors influencing trust is on responsibility. The responsibility of a brand as it relates to the brand trust scale is the perception that the brand will continue to perform the actions they claim they can do and are doing today (Delgado-Ballester, et al., 2003). When asked about what gives a sense of responsibility surrounding a brand, particpants often cited the knowledge of a track record of the brand already performing in such a manner. As found in the brand trust scale, when the perception that a brand is responsible is high, trust by a consumer in that brand increases.

Brands should recognise the need to communicate having consistent efforts towards meeting their sustainability claim to their consumers. An increase in the reporting and communication on steps that the brand has already taken, and ultimately willl contunue to take in order to meet their sustainable claim, can positively influence the level of trust by the consumer in the brand. Brands with insincere efforts will negatively affect the consumer's perception of the brand. This can be seen by how many participants spoke on the idea about feeling the need to decipher whether or not the brand's sustainable claim is a temporal action purely to win them over as a consumer, or a permanent shift of the brand's business and a true realignment towards sustainable initiatives.

Brands can build trust with their consumers by pushing communications and offering reporting on their historical practices in actions showcasing their work to meet their sustainable claim. These actions, in alignment with the findings of this reasearch, will give the consumer a sense of a proven track record for the brand in their efforts, ultimately leading to an increase in trust by the consumer.

5.2.4 Brand Incomplete Efforts

The first sub theme to be discussed that is categorised under the main theme of trust barriers is the theme of brand incomplete efforts. The findings of this research often pointed to an idea iterated by the participants that for a brand to have a sustainable claim, the brand should be existing in sustainable practices across the board in their business and not just a portion of the business. Brands that appear to only be addressing a portion of their business's sustainability but are pushing an overall sustainable brand claim bring up feelings of mistrust in the consumer.

Participants communicated feelings of being presented with sustainable claims by brands at times for the sake of an upsell or simply an opportunity for the company to make more money on a product. This goes against the definition of sustainable brands as defined by Spiliakos (2018), whereas a sustainable brand operates with a priority on reducing impacts on the environments and not on profits. A brand risks showing incomplete efforts to the consumers if they do not consistently market their position of minimizing their environmental impact across all of their products and services as is the case found in the definition of green marketing by Groening, et al (2018). These two fundamental definitions of sustainable brands and green marketing highlight that for a brand to truly participate in sustainable actions, the brand needs to act with holistic efforts across their company to comply with the stated definitions.

For a brand to have sustainable claims, they should be aware that the consumer will likely be evaluating the brand's performance overall when it comes to meeting those claims. Participants often spoke about when a brand is only pushing sustainability in parts of their business or applying it as an afterthought, for example through only the packaging of a product, the consumer is far less likely to put their trust behind the brand's sustainable claim.

For a brand to solidify trust with a consumer when it comes to their sustainability claims, they need to ensure that their claim matches the level to which they are acting

sustainably. If a brand is to use 100% sustainable practices as a claim, then they need to ensure communication efforts showcase them meeting that goal. If a brand is perceived to be under performing in their efforts to meet their sustainable claims, then the consumer is less likely to trust in that brand. One participant spoke about an instance of leaning more towards trusting a brand that gave a sense of realistic expectations to their claims in communicating to the participant how the brand is limited in what ways they can achieve sustainable initiatives in their business today. When compared against a brand that simply claimed vague sustainable practices across the board, the participant opted for the brand with the communication of a more realistic message.

Another effort brands can make to counter a feeling of incomplete efforts from consumers is to identify with established sustainable initiatives. An example of this would be for the brand to align with one or multiple UN SDGs (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The alignment by a brand with an established sustainable initiative would also play into the acknowledgment of consumer decision making as related to the VBN theory whereas individuals are influenced in their decision making process by the idea of feeling as if their decision allows them to be a part of some movement larger than themselves (Groening, et al., 2018). Through this alignment the brand will both be able to give strength to their position on sustainable initiatives as well as achieve greater influence on consumers to participate in relationship with them.

5.2.5 Brand Negativity

The final theme to be discussed is that of brand negativity. Brand negativity is a sub theme nested within the main theme of trust barriers. During data analysis, the results section pointed to the repeated referencing by participants about how any negative attention a brand receives surrounding their sustainability claims severely takes away from the participants

willingness to trust in that brand. Many of these instances cited by participants involved the similar idea of a brand being investigated for their sustainability claims and subsequently information coming available to consumers that show the brand's reality fully contradicting the brand's claims. Brands that are involved in areas of negative publicity like this severely limit their chances of building trust with consumers in their claims. Another result of this seen in responses from participants is the more that they learn about similarly related incidents involving any brand's claims being disproven, their overall ability to trust in brands claims in general lessens.

This theme of brand negativity ties into the reviewed literature in a connection with the Theory of Planned Behaviour. One of the main factors influencing decision making as defined by Azjen (1991) is societal norms. Societal norms can be expanded upon to be defined as the ideas and opinions of an individual's surrounding community giving influence on their decision making (Azjen, 1991). The link between TPB and the theme of brand negativity can be shown explicitly in how many participants cited instances of an outside source providing them with information about a brand's claims that ultimately influenced their willingness to trust in the brand's claims. The participants who spoke of these instances all showcased their steps taken through their decision-making process similarly to how consumer decision-making is defined by TPB.

Brands need to be intent on understanding the impact that a potential false claim being proven out to be false can have on a consumer's ability to trust in that brand's claims. A brand being caught out in misleading claims about their sustainability will have a potentially difficult time winning back the consumers trust in their claims. Addressing any negative claims head on with clear communication to the consumer needs to be a priority for brands in their continued pursuit for consumer trust.

Recommendations for brands addressing negativity surrounding their brand are twofold. The first recommendation involves brands who have not found themselves involved in any negative attention or press. These brands should perform holistic reviews of their sustainable claims and evaluate internally to measure if they are truly performing to the level that they claim. If the brand independently finds themselves unable to match their performance to their claims, the brand should audit and augment their claims to accurately represent their actions. These actions would show brand integrity to the consumer, and these actions tie back to the trust building theme of brand transparency.

The second recommendation involves brands that have found themselves in negative attention or press, possibly through a disproving by an outside party of any of their sustainable claims. A brand in this situation needs to be quick to communicate understanding of the results to consumers and provide ongoing open communications showing transparency into their process of how they are addressing all claims. This action too would feed into the trust building themes of both brand transparency and brand relationship with the consumer, as there would be a continued effort in building a relation with the consumer through the use of transparent communications.

5.3 Research Evaluation

The purpose of this section is to highlight positive attributes as well as negative attributes surrounding this research study itself. Research design and content will be evaluated.

5.3.1 Weaknesses/Limitations

The research preformed for this study aimed at discussing solely a brand's claims and how the claims by a brand can influence a consumer was often redirected by participants to include considerations of the product a brand provides itself, and not just the brand's claims.

This redirection by many participants showed a larger consideration process taking place for consumers outside of just considering what the brand states about their sustainable initiatives or practices. Understanding specifically on brand claims is potentially limited by the overall desire for consumers to discuss their consideration of product factors such as price, quality, or availability alongside the brand's sustainable claims. Participants evidenced their decision-making process is dependent on specific contexts in each buying situation they encounter. The researcher in the future may tailor the questions to encourage discussion more specifically and accurately on a brand's claims and marketing and discourage discourse on the products produced.

5.3.2 Strengths

This research study has strength in its use of exploratory techniques and qualitative research design. The use of semi-structured interviews proved to allow for commentaries on interesting and novel factors influencing trust for consumers in brands with sustainable claims. Participants were able to openly discuss their ideas surrounding each question on brand trust influences, giving insight to a greater depth of understanding surrounding the topic. The use of this research design ultimately strengthened the understanding of the topic being researched.

5.4 Research Applications

The purpose of this section is to discuss implications of this research both in the professional setting as well as the research field. Future research ideas as well as industry recommendations will be made based on this study.

5.4.1 Future Research Ideas

Researchers in the future may want to consider a focus on understanding how new brands in the marketplace can make immediate impact on consumer trust regarding their sustainable claims. One of the major themes that arose from this study was that of brands with a track record of success in both business as a whole and sustainability initiatives having a very positive influence on consumer trust. Some participants noted that brand new brands, or younger brands do not command the same levels of trust that they would put in established brands. New brands forming with sustainable initiatives and claims from inception is very possible today. A study focused on trust influencing factors with a specific focus on new brands could produce results that would be an encouragement to new sustainable brands forming, and not being held back by a lack of a track record in the brand's marketplace.

5.4.2 Research Recommendations

The recommendations from this research include the following items:

- To positively influence consumer trust, brands should lead first with transparent communications into their processes and performance in relation to their sustainable claims.
- To maintain integrity in their claims, brands should communicate openly any failings or missteps regarding their sustainable claims.
- To grow and encourage a relationship between brand and consumer, brands should ensure they are meeting the standards set for them in all areas of their business, not just sustainable claims, such as quality, customer service, and other factors; leading to a holistic view by the consumer that the brand is reliable all around.

- To create a sense of tenured success in their sustainable claims, brands should continuously communicate their progress and impact historically in relation to their claims. Continued communication showing efforts and progress over time to maintain a perception of continuing work towards the sustainable claims.
- To cultivate honest and transparent communications, brands should ensure their sustainable claims are in line with their capabilities as a brand. Brands should communicate realistic claims to consumers as well as how they plan to achieve the claims.
- To strengthen the sense of sustainability minded initiatives, brands should adopt established sustainable initiatives as part of their mission in their sustainable practices, such as the United Nations Sustainability Development Goals.
- To maintain a positive perception of meeting sustainable claims, brands should consistently audit their performance in relation to their claims; communicating to consumers any efforts or sections of business that are not in line with the brand's sustainable claims and with intentions on how to correct course.
- To regain positive perception and trust opportunities from consumers, brands that find themselves in negative attention surrounding their performance in relation to their sustainable claims should openly communicate exactly where the failure to abide is within their brand, and continuously communicate what steps are being taken to bring the brand back into alignment with the sustainable claims.

6.0 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand factors that influence consumer trust in relation to a brand's sustainable claim. Themes emerged from the research of trust building factors being, brand transparency, brand relationship with consumer, and brand track record. Trust barrier themes emerged that included brand incomplete efforts and brand negativity. The themes found in this research presented an idea that consumers strongly consider a brands integrity and overall market perception when deciding on their own levels of trust in a brand. Overall, consumers have more trust in a brand's sustainable claim when a brand has established history in the marketplace, transparent communication on their operations, or relational actions towards consumers. On the opposite end, consumers have less trust in a brand's sustainable claim when a brand has a negative perception in the marketplace, proven false claims, or only partial efforts towards sustainable initiatives. These findings align with existing literature in their connection to aspects such as the importance of brand relationships with consumers, the importance of reliability and responsibility in influencing brand trust, as well as the influence of societal norms on a consumer's decision-making process.

The implications of this study give insight into tangible themes surrounding what influences a consumer to trust in a brand's sustainable claims. These themes and ideas can be implemented by current brands in industry to promote the highest level of trust by their consumers in their sustainable claims. Some of those implementations include the effective use of transparent communications by brands into their processes aimed at achieving their sustainable claims, encouragement for brands to establish relational practices with consumers, and for brands to showcase their track record of success regarding achieving their sustainable claims. Further research is encouraged on understanding how these factors specifically affect new brands in the marketplace who cannot use historical relevance or proven track records as

influences on consumer trust in their sustainable claims. This study was performed to research, analyse and discuss factors that influence consumer trust in sustainable brand claims, presenting the findings for industry applications and future research impact.

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8.0 Appendices

8.1 Information Sheet for Participants

INFORMATION SHEET FOR Participants

Research project title: Identifying the factors that influence consumer trust in a brand's sustainability claim
Student Researcher: Jared Roberson – 10624009@mydbs.ie
Research Supervisor: Vinette McNamara

About the Project

I am a masters student at Dublin Business School and I am carrying out my thesis project under the direct supervision of Vinette McNamara on the subject of consumer trust in relation to a brand's sustainability claims.
The aim of the project is to understand the factors that influence a consumer to trust when a brand claims that they are sustainable.
I would like to invite you to take part in a recorded interview.
As a participant in the study, you would be required to answer questions about your feelings and experiences with sustainable brands in an interview format.

Data Protection

Interviews will be recorded for the sole purpose of facilitating later transcription of the data. Precise transcripts are important in research to ensure that data is recorded accurately, to allow the interviewer to be more present in the conversation and, importantly, to support greater accountability and scientific integrity. During the transcription phase your data will undergo de-identification involving the removal of all personally identifying information thereby rendering them anonymous for retention. The original recordings will be digitized and kept under password protection. Upon graduation all recordings will be permanently deleted. Your data will be used strictly for academic purposes and will not be shared with used or shared with anyone for commercial purposes. The researcher will adhere to strict ethical guidelines and principles and will not anecdotally share any personally identifying information about you with anyone.

What are the risks and benefits of taking part in this study?

In addition to providing much appreciated assistance to the student researcher, the main benefit of taking part in this study will be your contribution to academic research, which aims to expand knowledge and generate new insights. There will be no risks posed to you as a participant in this study, either physical or psychological, beyond that which is normally expected of day-to-day activities.

If you are interested in taking part…

If you are interested in taking part, please review the information provided in the consent form and if you are happy to proceed with the study then please indicate your willingness to take part by ticking the appropriate box / signing your name where appropriate.

You are under no obligation to take part in this study or to provide a reason if you decide not to take part. You may choose not to take part without fear of penalty. If you agree to take part, you have the right to cease participation and withdraw your data at any time for any reason without fear of penalty. The data will not be used by any member of the project team for commercial purposes.

8.2 Consent Form

Consent Form

I_____ voluntarily agree to take part in this research study.
I understand that I am not obliged to take part in this study and that my participation in the study is entirely voluntary.
I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to answer any question without the need to provide reason and without fear of negative consequences.
I understand that digital recordings will be stored under password protection for some time until the approval of their dissertation by the examination board, at which point recordings will be permanently deleted.
I understand that my data will undergo de-identification during transcription and will be rendered anonymous for retention and for the purpose of subsequent publications.
I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.
I understand that signed consent forms will be retained for some time until the exam board confirms the results of their dissertation.
I confirm that I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study with satisfactory answers provided.
I confirm that I have read and fully understood the information provided and statements above.

Name & Signature of research participant	Date
_____	_____
Name & Signature of researcher	Date
_____	_____