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Bachelor thesis

The power of trust:

Exploring what influences consumer trust in environmental sustainability claims.



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Abstract:

Background: Environmental sustainability claims refers to communications made by companies about their improved environmental performance.

Improved environmental performance can for example be a company claiming to emit less carbon dioxide or climate compensating the consumer's purchase. Suppose a company has skewed or simply been dishonest in its communication. In that case, it can significantly and negatively impact the company since it ruins the consumer's perception and trust towards the company. Therefore, consumers must be able to create trust in companies. Consumer trust can be divided into two building blocks, including concepts. The first building block consists of knowledge and engagement in environmental sustainability. The second building block consists of brand image, perceived risk, and perceived value.

Purpose: This thesis aims to explore what influences consumers' trust regarding environmental sustainability claims.

Methodology: This study took the approach of qualitative research. The study's results were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which gave the participants freedom to answer the questions and if the participants went far off topic the moderator could guide them back to the area of interest. The sampling method used for this research was purposive sampling, which allowed the researchers to choose participants who would contribute to the study since they had a pre-understanding of the topic.

Findings: From the results of the semi-structured interviews, the authors identified four different patterns which create consumer trust towards environmental sustainability claims. These patterns were lack of information, Knowledge and engagement of Environmental sustainability, Sensitivity of the price and knowledge and Evaluation of the products.

Conclusion: The authors concluded four patterns that create consumers' trust



towards environmental sustainability claims. These four patterns that create consumers' trust should be considered by companies when communicating an environmental sustainability claim in order to create a trusting relationship with the consumers.

Keywords:

Consumer trust, Environmental sustainability claims, Communication, Evaluation of claims



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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This study will focus on consumer trust and what factors influence trust regarding environmental sustainability claims. The definition of environmental claims refers to communications made by companies about their improved environmental performance. These communicated claims can, for example, be from the car manufacturing industry when a company claims that one of their new models is emitting less than other cars. Another example of environmental claims is climate compensation if the consumer pays extra, which is common in the airline industry. More examples can be found in communications claiming they are climate-positive or carbon-neutral. These are examples of environmental sustainability claims which will be used for this thesis.

From the sender's perspective, companies nowadays put much effort into becoming more sustainable since a sustainable firm leads to an improved brand image and consumer reputation (Rezaee, Zabihollah, and Tuo, 2019). By providing improved sustainability performances, the customer perceives the value of the company's products or services as higher than if there were no environmental improvements. Therefore, companies must improve their environmental performance to improve their reputation and position in the market (Rezaee, Zabihollah, and Tuo, 2019). However, to do so, the companies need to accurately communicate their environmental claims since there has been an ongoing discussion about whether the environmental performances they communicate are trustworthy and reliable (Jørgensen, Pedersen, and Skard, 2021).

Therefore, the receiver's perspective is the most critical factor because it creates trust for environmental sustainability. Suppose a company has skewed or simply been dishonest in its communication. In that case, it can



have a significant and negative impact on the company since it ruins the consumer's perception and trust towards the company. By misleading customers in terms of communication of environmental performances, companies miss out on building trust, which negatively affects consumers' trust in the company. (Zeqiri, Ramadani, and Aloulou, 2022)

Furthermore, to understand how companies' environmental sustainability claim influences consumers, two building blocks in the form of consumers' evaluation of the claim and consumers' trust have been included. The first part is divided into two factors, which are knowledge of environmental sustainability and engagement in environmental sustainability. Consumers' knowledge and engagement influence consumers' evaluations of the claims because of the information they have and how engaged they are in sustainable development (Leonidou, Gruber, and Schlegelmilch, 2022). Secondly, consumer trust is described as when customers have previous experiences with products and brands and therefore create trust since they can predict the outcome of the product (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan, 2015). Furthermore, Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan (2015) mentioned that consumer trust is when the customer feels safe, secure, and less risk which leads to the consumers having a higher belief and higher trust in the company. According to Wilkins, Shazam & Megicks (2021) a part of consumer trust is perceived value and perceived risk. Pine & Gilmore (1999) describes perceived value as consumers' perception of a product and how much extra benefit they get from the product. On the other hand, perceived risk refers to the risk consumers have to take when consuming a product or service (Bauer, 1960).

1.2 Problem discussion



Companies that have made environmental sustainability claims that have been perceived as untrustworthy due to the fact that companies have skewed or been dishonest about the environmental performances in order to be favorable for the company and be perceived as a responsible company (Guerreiro and Pacheco, 2021). If a company has skewed or simply been dishonest in their communication it can have a significant and negative impact on the company since it ruins the consumer's perception and trust towards the company. Once consumers have been betrayed by skewed or dishonest communication the consumers will form a perception of the brand as being untrustworthy, a perception that could stay for many years. Therefore, trust is not only essential to build and sustain relationships but also since it influences the perceived value and brand image (Zeqiri, Ramadani, and Aloulou, 2022). By misleading customers in terms of communication of environmental performances companies miss out on building trust (Zeqiri, Ramadani, and Aloulou, 2022).

Therefore, companies need to communicate their environmental sustainability claims in the proper manner to be perceived as trustworthy. To do so, the companies must understand what factors influence consumer trust. Previous studies have shown that perceived value, risk, and brand image influence consumer trust (Chen and Chang, 2012). Selvakumar and Artshi (2019) further describe in their study that perceived value influences brand image since valuing quality and status forms a relationship with a brand. Jørgensen, Pedersen, and Skard (2021) argue in the same line that for consumers to trust companies, it is crucial that the efforts are seen as real improvements and that their overall efforts matter in terms of environmental sustainability. In the end, the consumer's perceptions decide whether improvements matter or not. Therefore, improvements that matter for sustainable development are important instead of claiming improvements to be recognized as sustainable (Jørgensen, Pedersen, and Skard, 2021). This is supported by Guerreiro and Pacheco (2021), who states that if a company's environmental performance is misleading, it can backfire and result in the consumers perceiving a company as untrustworthy. Guerreiro and Pacheco



(2021) further explain that misleading corporate communication is the dominant factor holding back the green market.

This can also relate to the current research regarding consumer trust and environmental sustainability. The majority of this research is hard to put the theories into practice. In a recent study by Jørgensen, Pedersen, and Skard (2021), they describe that if a company claims that they are environmentally sustainable after only making some tiny improvements in sustainability, it could negatively impact the consumer's trust. Instead, it is how much more sustainable the improvements made by the company are that positively influence the trust of consumers rather than just making improvements (Jørgensen, Pedersen, and Skard, 2021). Furthermore, based on the current state of research, it is clear that some companies still exaggerate or mislead their environmental sustainability claims. This could be due to a lack of theories to take into practice. With theories that can easily be applied to practice, it will help companies and consumers gain trust in each other. Therefore, the research on consumer trust and environmental sustainability claims needs to be further developed for companies to understand their customers.

Furthermore, research focusing on consumers' trust towards claims needs to be developed to minimize the risk of societal issues if consumers continue not to trust the information companies provide. Further, customers that do not trust the information provided by companies can lead to them being less environmentally conscious which in turn leads to negative environmental consequences. By being less environmentally conscious, customers tend to choose products that are not made from sustainable materials and not caring about, for example, reducing their energy consumption. This in turn leads to problems that could be classified as societal issues since it hinders the progression of environmental sustainability (Zikargae, Woldearegay, Skjerdal, 2022). Furthermore, it slows down the progress for a sustainable future in terms of companies not being motivated to invest in environmentally friendly practices. This in turn makes it hard for consumers



to invest in a sustainable future since companies do not sell products with environmentally sustainable benefits. This leads to low customer demand for environmentally sustainable products. Therefore, lack of trust in environmental practices can have a crucial impact on the future of society and the environment (Zikargae, Woldearegay, Skjerdal, 2022).

Because if people in society get misleading information from companies, it can damage the overall evaluation of information. Regarding the problems, the current state of research and possible future societal issues are necessary theoretical tools. Therefore, this study is divided into two aspects: the evaluation of the claim and consumers' trust. Evaluations of the claim are closely connected to the consumers' knowledge and engagement. Secondly, consumer trust consists of perceived value, risk, and brand image. These are the base defining factors influencing consumers' trust in environmental sustainability claims.

1.3 Purpose

The aim of this thesis is to explore what influences consumers' trust regarding environmental sustainability claims.



1.4 Research Question

How can trust be created in consumers' evaluations of environmental sustainability claims?

2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is presented in an order in which the first subchapters describe what influences environmental claims. Here, environmental engagement, knowledge, and messages are defined. Environmental engagement and knowledge could affect how consumers perceive environmental sustainability claims from companies. Therefore, the theoretical framework starts with defining environmental engagement,



knowledge, and environmental sustainability messages. The Following subchapters describe environmental claims focusing on concepts that influence consumer trust. Brand image, perceived quality, and risk are introduced since these concepts have a strong influence on building consumer trust.

2.1 Evaluation of claims

The progression of environmental sustainability is a concept with much left to be discovered and developed according to Leonidou, Gruber, and Schlegelmilch's (2022) study. They mention that there is a positive correlation between interdependence and environmental sustainability. To further explain, interdependence refers to individuals' dependence on each other. If all individuals act more sustainably, individuals could count on each other to achieve environmental sustainability (Leonidou, Gruber, and Schlegelmilch, 2022). Therefore, the process of securing life on earth now and for future generations, according to Leonidou, Gruber, and Schlegelmilch (2022), heavily depends on society and its individuals to collaborate. However, to achieve collectivism, the awareness of environmental sustainability needs to be raised for individuals to understand that they are responsible for raising the quality of life in society regarding sustainability.

Further, Salnikova, Strizhakova, and Coulter (2022) touch upon what Leonidou, Gruber, and Schlegelmilch (2022) discussed and also mention the importance of raising the awareness of environmental sustainability in order to progress with the objectives of securing life on earth. However, Bernyte (2018) states that people have started to become more environmentally conscious and aware; however, many improvements still need to be made. To improve the quality of human life for present and future generations, there needs to be environmental sustainability activism from society since the only way of improving and sustaining the environment is if people start to act more sustainably. Leonidou, Gruber, and Schlegelmilch (2022) further



mention that to achieve activism concerning environmental sustainability, there first needs to be beliefs in environmental sustainability. People and society need to believe in the importance of sustainability and that they have a responsibility and an ability to impact the environment to start to act towards environmental sustainability (Leonidou, Gruber, and Schlegelmilch, 2022). Therefore, the environmental sustainability process starts with individuals' beliefs which could lead to improving the quality of life.

2.1.1 Environmental Sustainability Messages

The communication of environmentally friendly or green products has increased, and with the increase of environmental communication, there is much information for consumers to process, which is being processed in many different ways. In a study by Lim et al. (2013), four different moments of concern are identified. The first moment is the consumer's understanding of a communicated green product. Many consumers feel that they need to know if the product is green and define a need for more information on the actual environmental performance. Secondly, Lim et al. (2013) mentioned that consumers also get a sense of distrust towards the communicated sustainable benefits. Many consumers connected the research material to distrust because they thought their money for green products was, in many cases, wasted, which resulted in distrust. The third moment of concern that affected consumers after being exposed to deceptive claims from companies was the factor of cautiousness.

Further, consumers will have a more cautious mind when they want to purchase a green product. They will spend more time on research and information collection about the products. The fourth and last factor affected by untrustworthy information is that consumers will spread the word about products that they feel are untrustworthy and also spread the knowledge of being more reserved about information focused on sustainability. (Lim., et al., 2013)



Another important factor in communication is the form of communication. Rogala and Bialowas (2016) mentioned in their study that there are certain variables companies have to consider when planning their communication in order for the consumers to pay attention and process the information in the right way. One variable Rogala and Bialowas (2016) mentions is that communication from a consumer's perspective is dominated by modern technology such as social media. Therefore, companies need to adapt their marketing communication towards these modern technologies to gain attention from consumers. Another variable Rogala and Bialowas (2016) mentions are the information competence and behavior of the consumers. Therefore, companies need to be clear with the information in their communication so that they do not experience what Lim., et al. (2013) mentioned about consumers not trusting the information.

2.2 Consumer trust

Marketing has one overall goal: to generate a relationship between consumers and the brand. One crucial factor for this connection is to create trust. Furthermore, consumers' perception of trust is essential to minimize the consumer's risk-taking actions (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Pervan, 2015). When consumers feel safe, secure, and confident, the risk decreases, meaning they have a higher belief and trust in the company. Consumer trust is something that develops over time with previous experiences. When customers have a previous experience with a product or service, the customer forms predictability and dependability towards the brand. Predictability is formed when the customer has a consistent experience with the brand. To create dependability, the customer needs to have further experience, which helps the customer to form a set of beliefs that eventually leads to trust. Consumer trust is therefore formed from repeated positive experiences, which have formed predictability and dependability in the consumer's mind (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Pervan, 2015).



Another concept within consumer trust is consumer distrust which is the opposite of consumer trust. Mal, Davies, and Diers-Lawson (2018) agree that distrust and trust are within the same concept, but there are still two sides to the same concept. Furthermore, distrust refers to when customers have low trust in the company, and trust refers to the consumer having created trust towards a specific company based on the company's characteristics and behaviors. Further, Mal, Davies, and Diers-Lawson (2018) state that a customer's trust in a company is either based on distrust or trust early in the relationship with a brand. In other words, there is nothing in between because the consumers either agree or disagree with the company's characteristics. However, the more a consumer discovers new characteristics of a company, a grey zone between trust and distrust can be formed since specific characteristics are perceived as positive and negative in regard to trust. Further, Mal, Davies, and Diers-Lawson (2018) argue that this could happen when consumers evaluate a brand's quality and reliability versus when they evaluate how the company communicates with its customers.

Another factor influencing trust is customer reviews. Soares, Dolci, and Lunardi (2022) mention in their study that building consumer trust is heavily influenced by reviews from previous consumers. Roza, Octavia, and Sriayudha (2022) agree with the results from Soares, Dolci, and Lunardi's (2022) study and state that customer reviews affect an increase or decrease in consumer trust. Reviews of products or services can influence consumer trust negatively or positively. Soares, Dolci, and Lunardi (2022) further explain that a consumer that has read positive reviews is more likely to form consumer trust towards a company compared to negative reviews, which can cause the opposite, which are that, the consumer not forming any trust. Furthermore, Soares, Dolci, and Lunardi (2022) also mention that negative reviews have more influence than positive ones since the results from their study showed that when reading negative reviews, trust is reduced by 33% compared to the 18% increase in trust when reading positive reviews. Therefore, it is clear that consumers are more affected by negative reviews than positive ones regarding building consumer trust. The research by



Soares, Dolci, and Lunardi (2022) also shows that reviews from friends or family more influence consumers than reviews from unknown people. This can also work in both positive and negative ways. For example, a friend or family that recommends a product positively influences trust towards that product and brand more than a review from an unknown person. The same goes for negative reviews from friends or family, which negatively influences trust more than negative reviews from random persons.

2.2.1 Brand Image Concerning Trust

Kwon et al. (2021) provide evidence that a close connected relationship between companies and consumers influences the brand's performance, which can be connected with increased consumer engagement. The increase in consumer engagement can also be connected to a more favorable brand attitude. Chen (2009) goes in line with Kwon et al. (2021), and their research concludes the investigation that green brand image, green satisfaction, and green trust positively affect brand equity. This is related to the fact that expanding to a more sustainable market and building a green brand image and green satisfaction create a competitive advantage. Creating green satisfaction and satisfying the consumers' need for sustainable performance is the primary factor in building a solid green brand (Chen, 2009). The importance of branding can also be connected to Selvakumar and Artshi (2019), which in their study, concluded that a company's brand image is one major factor when consumers decide to buy a green product. The perceived value also influences brand trust. Selvakumar and Artshi (2019) further mention that consumers increase their perceived value due to quality, status, and self-esteem, positively affecting the brand image. Selvakumar and Artshi (2019) also concluded that in specific industries, environmental promises are a significantly important factor since they influence the overall perception of the product. On the other hand, brand trust is most influenced by the honesty and reliability of the brand (Selvakumar and Artshi, 2019).



2.2.2 Perceived Value In Regards To Trust

A part of consumer trust is perceived value. Further, perceived value is defined by Pine and Gilmore (1999) as consumers' perceptions of a product and how much extra benefit they get from the product. The different benefits can also be divided into three characteristics that are the base for perceived value. Patterson and Sprang (1997) state that Perceived value directly relates to purchase intention and is strongly affected by purchase satisfaction. It is also clear that consumers' interpretations of what factors influence value differ. (Patterson and Sprang, 1997). Zeithaml (1988) also describes different comparisons between variables that create perceived value for consumers. Zeithaml (1988) explores four factors that create perceived value for respondents. The first group's values are low price, meaning the respondent's value perception is based on price.

Further, the second group also mainly focuses on the price aspect but also considers the quality of the products. The third group was more centralized around another factor, the product's main benefit. Finally, the last group focus on “value is what I get compared with what I give.” Perceived value combines what the consumers give and get from the purchase (Zeithaml, 1988).

Further, Wilkins, Shazam, and Megick's (2021) study describe the importance of building perceived value. In this study, Wilkins, Shazam, and Megicks (2021) present evidence that perceived value positively affects repurchase behaviors and is the starting point for building strong customer relationships. Amri et al. (2019) is aligned with Wilkins, Shazam, and Megicks (2021) and describe a positive connection between trust and perceived value. Since perceived value affects the consumer's overall satisfaction and increases the potential for building loyal consumers, creating perceived value is vital for the overall experience and creating satisfied consumers (Amri et al., 2019). A positive effect of perceived value is also stated by Yang et al. (2021). The study shows that perceived value has a connection with impulsive buying behavior. This means that if consumers



have a higher amount of perceived value, consumers make more rapid decisions in the purchase process. (Yang et.al, 2021). Therefore, by working with the perceived value of products or services, the perceived value can be increased and can provide benefits for consumers in terms of building trust in a company. It can be the beginning of a relationship. Furthermore, Zeqiri, Ramadani, and Aloulou (2022) mentioned in their study that trust positively influence the perceived value and customers' intentions to repurchase. Further, regarding online shopping, customers tend to purchase from brands they trust by evaluating their products online and searching for information on the company's website (Zeqiri, Ramadani, and Aloulou, 2022).

The development of sustainability products' perceived value can be connected to environmentally sustainable work. This perspective is called green perceived value. Green perceived value is centered around the same description as perceived value but is more focused on the perceived value of products that are more sustainable. Chen, Chang (2012) divides the definition of green perceived value into three aspects. The first one focuses on if the environmental benefits of the products satisfy the value of sustainability for the consumer. The central aspect of satisfying consumers is to offer the primary benefit. For that reason, the more sustainable products must satisfy the primary benefit of the products, not to lose the original advantages of the product. (Chen and Chang,2012)

Secondly, if the consumers feel that the environmental performance fulfills the consumer's expectations, consumers do have a perceived value in terms of the environmental performance that the company mediates. If sustainable actions do not perform as consumers understand, can this lead to less green perceived value in the future. Thirdly, are the products bought based on the product's environmental benefits, compared with alternatives. When consumers compare different alternatives in terms of the product's sustainability, this can lead to an increase in perceived green value. When consumers feel that one product is more sustainable than another, the perceived green value for this product increases. These are factors that



influence the consumers in terms of the green perceived value. (Chen and Chang, 2012)

Companies focus on communicating their environmental sustainability improvements to their consumers because this can lead to higher value evaluations. Suppose companies are using marketing to increase the perceived green value. This can lead to an increase in the factors that affect the perceived value and the overall satisfaction of the purchase (Lam, Lau, and Cheung, 2016). Chen, and Chang (2012) also provide evidence that increased green perceived value positively affects consumers' trust and green purchase attention. Furthermore, Chen, and Chang, (2012) argue that the most essential factor is to fulfill the product's paramount need and primary benefit. Because if the more sustainable products miss the primary benefit, the race of the green perceived value will be unnecessary.

On the other hand, Guerrero and Pacheco (2021) argue for the other spectrum of green perceived value. Credibility is the highest priority when marketing and advertising deliver a sustainable message. If the message lacks credibility, it can easily backfire on the company. When a company increases the green perceived value, and the consumers subsequently feel that the environmental performance does not equal the perceived value, the relationship and trust with the consumers might be damaged (Guerrero and Pacheco, 2021).

2.2.3 Perceived Risk In Regards To Trust

Another part of consumer trust is perceived risk. Bauer (1960) defines perceived risk as the risk consumers have to take when consuming a product or service. The unknown outcome of the purchase, and the potential negative consequences, are two factors that form perceived risk. Therefore, it is crucial to work with risk reduction to provide a service or product that results in less risk-taking. Bauer (1960) mentions two factors for reducing risk. The



first is an external search for information, which can be connected to word of mouth. When consumers search for information about a product or service and create knowledge, it can lead to a decrease in risk for consumers (Bauer, 1960). The second factor is loyalty to a brand; staying loyal to a brand most consumers relate to a reduction in risk-taking. When a consumer has tested products and the service from a company with a satisfactory outcome, it can be connected to a lower risk of repurchasing from the same brand, increasing the loyalty between the company and the consumer (Bauer, 1960).

The article by Murphy and Enis (1986) mentions two different characteristics of perceived risk, which are financial and physical. The financial risk is centralized around the risk management of buying a product and the risk of wasting unnecessary money. Every purchase decision involves risk, and according to Kotler (1972), the first factor that influences perceived risk is the risk of wasting unnecessary money. Secondly, physical risk refers to that need, which has to be considered in some branches and product categories. By considering physical risk, companies can focus on the product's potential risk of harming or damaging the user or its surroundings. (Monroe, Della Bitta, and Downey, 1997).

The aim is always to have as low a perceived risk as possible because when having a high perceived risk, purchase behavior is negatively impacted, which Lee et al. (2019) state. Further, factors influencing the perceived risk were described as geographic aspects, which type of purchase channel and country. Lee et al. (2019) also describe that consumers had a higher perceived risk towards online purchases than physical purchase channels. The research by Kim, Ferrin, and Rao (2008) goes along the same line, stating that perceived risk had a strong negative impact on purchase intentions and is, for that reason, a critical factor in increasing sales and the consumers' experience. Furthermore, increasing the purchase intentions of perceived risk management for consumers is of great importance since it negatively affects purchase intention (Kim, Ferrin and Rao, 2008).

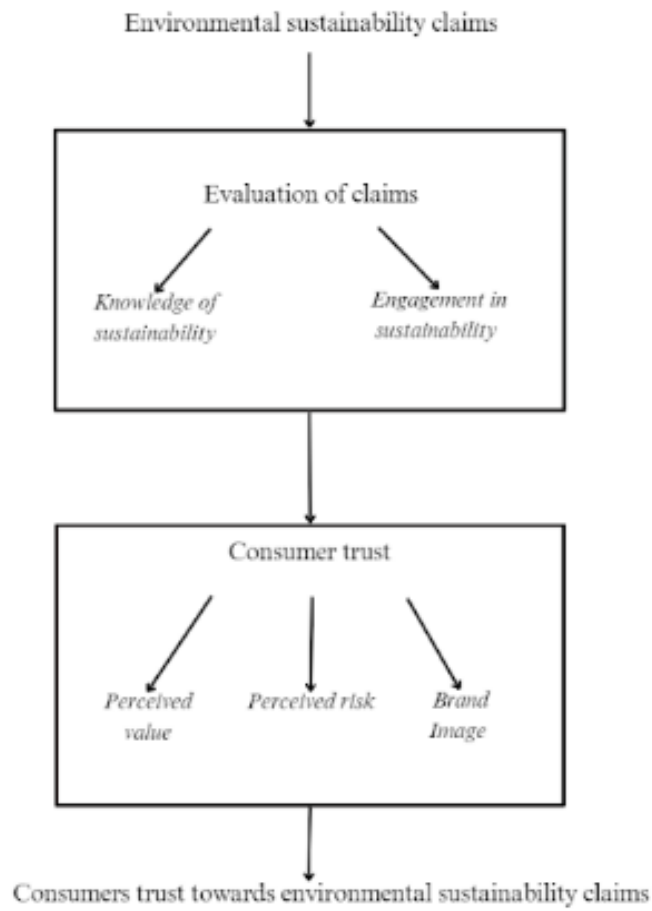


In the same line as the perceived value, the perceived risk can also be connected to the sustainable approach. The perceived risk connected to environmental sustainability can be defined as green perceived risk. Consumers' interpretation of the perceived risk of sustainable products can be divided into five different factors that influence consumers' risk evaluations. The first factor (1) it can be something with the environmental performance of the products, (2) it can be something wrong with the products, (3) it can be an environmental loss because of the product, (4) The products can negatively affect the environment and (5) the risk of damaging the green image or reputation. This can be used to understand consumers' risk of buying sustainable products. (Chen, Chang, 2012). Chen, and Chang, (2012) concludes that increasing green perceived quality decreases consumers' green-perceived risk. They also describe consumers' importance in starting with a strategy to maximize consumers perceived quality and consumer satisfaction. Because this is the most effective way to create long-term relationships and minimize the consumer's risk of buying a more sustainable product. (Chen, Chang, 2012)

2.3 Conceptual Model

The model starts with a company's environmental sustainability claims, which leads to the evaluation of the claim for consumers. This part is divided into knowledge of sustainability and engagement in sustainability. Furthermore, the second influential cluster is the consumer trust aspect. This part is divided into three factors: perceived value, risk, and brand image. With the help of this model, the factors that influence consumers' trust in environmental sustainability claims can be defined and used as a tool for companies to understand how to build trust for consumers in environmental sustainability communication.

Table B: Åkerberg, Friberg Jonsson, Barrklint (2023)





3 Method

The following methodological chapter includes the methodology process and each step the authors have taken. The chapter is centralized around research strategy & design and research quality. This methodological chapter has been conducted in order for readers and future researchers to be able to follow and understand each step taken for this study.

3.1 Research Strategy in Qualitative Research

The research of the thesis is based on a qualitative approach because it aims to understand the relationship between consumers' trust in companies' environmental sustainability claim. Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) state that a qualitative approach fits research that will focus more on interpretation and words rather than numbers and numerical relationships between variables, which are a central point of quantitative research. Therefore, qualitative research was applied to this research since the aim is to investigate the factors behind what causes trust, focusing more on words and meaning instead of numbers.

When conducting qualitative research, the researchers need to consider what philosophical assumptions are made. Without considering philosophical assumptions, Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) mention that the researchers are less likely to provide valuable knowledge and data. Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) further mention two crucial aspects of philosophical assumptions, ontological and epistemological considerations. Ontological considerations refer to theorizing about the nature of reality. Put simply, ontology means that we wonder what it means for something to exist. Regarding qualitative research, ontology is connected to constructionism. The constructionism position is referred to by Bryman, Bell, and Harley



(2018) as when the social actors socially construct the phenomena of the study and its meanings. For example, in regard to this study, environmental sustainability is viewed as a social construct since it is the social actors that have caused the environmental problems over the past decades. The second philosophical assumption is epistemology; the epistemological position concerning qualitative research is interpretivism which refers to understanding human behavior, compared to ontology, which is to explain human behavior (Bryman, Bell, and Harley, 2018). Epistemology was therefore considered in this research since the authors investigated the factors which cause trust and therefore aimed to understand the human behavior that affects trust.

3.1.1 Data analysis strategy in Qualitative Research

Qualitative research has an inductive approach, which refers to the researcher being open-minded regarding the data gathered to create new concepts and theories (Bryman, Bell, and Harley, 2018). A thematic analysis strategy was applied when analyzing the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis approach is when the researcher searches for recurring themes within the data collected. A theme is, therefore a topic that has been discussed often by different participants of the interviews. Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) further mention certain factors of interest when searching for themes within the data collection. These repetitions refer to a topic that has been discussed many times. In the case of this research semi-structured interview, the authors applied this factors when looking for topics that occurred over most of the interviews. Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) also mention the variable of looking at the participants' way of describing the topics differently.

When conducting a thematic analysis, it is well complemented with coding. Coding is the start of most qualitative research data analysis. Coding is described as identifying and categorizing data to pinpoint themes and the relationship between the data. Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) further



describe that there are specific steps when it comes to coding which the authors should have control over. Besides coding and rephrasing the data into words or sentences, the authors should consider generating codes connected to theoretical ideas. This was applied in the data analysis when the authors searched for recurring data connected to the research theories. Further, Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) describe that the authors should try to form connections between these codes and between the codes and existing literature. The authors should also consider that codes could be described in various ways and should not worry about generating too many codes.

3.2 Research design

The research design uses the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews. The sampling is based on the purposive approach with 12 different participations.

3.2.1 Semi-structured Interview

The authors used semi-structured interviews to gather the empirical data for this study. Semi-structured interviews are defined by Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) as a research strategy for qualitative research. Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) further define semi-structured interviews as when the researchers have certain questions prepared to cover specific topics of interest to the researchers. However, the participant can freely answer the questions, and the researcher can ask follow-up questions on specific answers that the researcher still needs to prepare for. Therefore, in semi-structured interviews, the participants can answer freely, but if the participant drifts away from the topic, the moderator can guide the participants back to the topics of interest so that the data gathered is from the same topic as the other participants. This was applied for this research with the prepared questions, which can be seen in the operationalization table. Beyond the



prepared questions, more questions were formed during the interviews when an interviewer had an exciting answer that the authors wanted them to expand on. Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) further mention that a study is conducted with a specific focus (in this case, trust towards environmental claims), semi-structured interviews are preferred compared to unstructured interviews since it becomes easier for the researchers to find answers to the issues being studied. This is because the help of the components from the operationalization table can guide the interviewees to recall specific events that interest the authors. Since the participants can answer freely it fits the purpose of the research to explore what causes trust. Because they can answer freely the authors could explore what factors lie behind trust. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were preferred over unstructured and structured interviews since if either of those were applied instead the empirical data would have been too far away from the topic or not as exploratory as desired (Bryman, Bell, and Harley, 2018).

3.2.2 Purposive sampling

Purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling, meaning the sample participants are selected using a non-random sampling method (Bryman, Bell, and Harley, 2018). The purposive sampling method is when the researchers conduct and choose the sample based on the study's research question. (Bryman, Bell, and Harley, 2018). Furthermore, the characteristic of purposive sampling is to identify individuals who can contribute to the research by being willing to share their topic experiences with the researchers. Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) also describe that a purposive sampling method focuses on a relatively small sample size. Therefore, the purposive sampling method is a qualitative research method used to gain insights from participants with detailed information contributing to the phenomena and aim of the study.



The reason behind choosing a non-probability sample is that the researchers want to ensure that a variety of sample members differ from each other in terms of characteristics that contribute to answering the research question. Furthermore, Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) describe that when research is based on a non-probability sample the purposive sampling method does not allow the researchers to generalize it to a population. However, the answers based on a purposive sampling method allow the readers to get rich and unique data which could be helpful for the researchers in order to understand behaviors and motives behind the answers. The first two questions of the interviews worked as a criteria for the participants. If the participants had no knowledge or engagement in sustainability they would have been excluded from the interview since they would not have contributed to the research. That is why all interview participants have good environmental sustainability knowledge and engagement, therefore more likely to contribute to the research.

Furthermore, Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) describe that the sample members are picked based on characteristics connected to the research question and objectives of the study. For this research, the characteristics the authors were basing their sample on were people with experience purchasing sustainable products and being environmentally engaged. To achieve a sample that checked the criteria for purposive sampling the authors asked questions about the participant's environmental engagement and knowledge before the interview to know that they could contribute to the research. Since this research is not meant to be generalized towards a specific age group the authors choose not to focus on sampling a specific age group and therefore sampled mixed ages. The most crucial factor when sampling was how much knowledge and experience the participants had regarding environmental sustainability and not factors such as age and gender since that would not benefit this research. This study's sample size was 12 participants for the semi-structured interviews. The authors conducted 12 interviews because Bobby (2016) mentioned that a sample size of 12 participants was optimal for data saturation. Further, Bryman, Bell, and Harley (2018) explain that



data saturation or theoretical saturation is when no new or relevant data emerges from conducting new interviews.

3.2.3 Operationalization table

The operationalization table is based on concepts defined in the theoretical framework. The concepts are the base for the questions that are created for the data collection for the investigation.

**The operationalization table can be found in the appendix. **

3.2.4 Interview guide

The authors interviewed 12 participants and one participant at a time, so the participants could feel safe speaking freely and expressing their true thoughts by not being affected by other participants or the interviewers. The interviews began with a brief introduction on how and why the interviews were conducted. Further, the participants were informed that the interviews would be audio recorded so the authors could listen to the interviews again to avoid missing out on any essential details. The participants were also informed that they were 100% guaranteed anonymity since their real names were protected and given aliases. After the brief introduction, one question at a time was brought forward for the participant.

For the interviews, the questions are based on the concepts from the theoretical framework to ask questions that helped the authors achieve the aim of the study. Each concept was divided into one or more items which formed a question. The questions for the semi-structured interviews can be seen in the operationalization table. The interviews began with questions regarding environmental engagement and knowledge to understand how environmentally conscious and aware the participants were. After the general



questions about the participants' engagement with environmental sustainability, more questions were asked regarding trust and concepts influencing trust. When asking questions about the concepts, specific examples/scenarios were given to provide a clear picture for the participants. When the participants were asked how they would act in a particular scenario, the authors asked follow-up questions to understand why they would act that way.

3.3 Research quality

One key factor for creating a reliable methodology is to ensure the research quality. For that reason, the investigation has included ethical and social issues, but also the aspect of reliability.

3.3.1 Ethical and Societal Issues

The ethical issues in qualitative research are divided into autonomy, beneficence, and justice. The first aspect, autonomy, is, according to Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2001), the protection and the importance of the participant's safety in the research. The participant needs to be fully informed about the research and could be allowed to withdraw at any time without penalty. The researcher needs to be able to protect the participant's identity, this is the key factor to provide ethical research, Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2001). The second aspect, beneficence, is connected to the fact that the research could positively affect others and prevent harm to people. The researcher needs to understand the effects the research can have on other individuals, companies, and society overall. The third and last aspect is the factor of justice. Participants in the research should be treated equally and with the exact prerequisites and must be provided with information about the



information included in the investigation. (Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden, 2001).

This ethical consideration has been included to investigate consumers' trust. First, the interview participants have been fully informed about the research purpose. Secondly, all the individuals are allowed to be anonymous and can choose not to answer or leave the interview at any time. This can also be connected to the beneficence aspects. If the participants do not feel good about how the research can affect other people, this can also be a reason for quitting or voluntarily being excluded from the investigation. Even so, it can be challenging for the participants to understand the complete picture of the research when they are getting interviewed, the participants can have a negative attitude towards the research's potential harm to society. Last of all, with a clear interview guide, the information for all the participants can be equal, ensuring the research's justice aspect. It is also vital for the researcher to have clear guidelines and to direct the interview in the right direction.

3.3.2 Reliability

Reliability is defined by Long and Johnson (2000) as the correctness of the conclusion or scientific contribution of the study. The importance of actually concentrating on the purpose and overall design of the study and understanding the factors that are measured are the mediated conclusion. Understanding the reliability factor is highly relevant because this can make the study more transparent and structured and create a correct scientific contribution. Furthermore, three different characteristics have been used to implement the reliability factor. First is the stability aspect, in which all the participants get the same questions. Secondly, consistency refers to giving the participants the same opportunity to answer on a specific topic, which means that the interview guide needs to be precise. The last factor is equivalence, which relates to the reliability of the answer. The participant



should be able to answer the same question or get the opportunity to answer the same questions on different questions. (Long and Johnson, 2000)

The reliability aspect has been implemented in this study with the help of the three characteristics. With the help of the interview guide, the questions in the operationalization table have been carefully decided to ensure the participant's equal chance by providing their answers. Because of the semi-structured interviews that are the base of the research, the researcher has the significant responsibility to provide questions that are stable, consistent and equivalent.

4 Empirical Investigation

The empirical chapter is the collected information from the semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, the empirical investigation is created based on the questions from the operationalization table. The focus of the first part is the description of the participants' environmental engagement, knowledge, and



how the consumers evaluate the communicated claim. The second part focuses on consumer trust, which consists of the materials connected to brand image and perceived value and risk. Also, since the participants were anonymous they were given aliases.

4.1 Environmental engagement and knowledge of sustainability

In regards to knowledge, most participants answered similarly. The majority of the interviewees said that their environmental sustainability knowledge was good. Michael and Meredith stated that their knowledge was well referred to and that he has more knowledge within specific industries and other industries he is not as confident in his knowledge. This goes in line with other participants such as Pam, Angela, and Bob, who stated that since they have work experience within groceries and clothing, their knowledge within these industries is very good however, they gave an example of the car manufacturing industry and stated that they do not have as much knowledge within that area. Therefore, most participants said that their overall knowledge was not perfect since they have better knowledge in some industries than others. However, three participants, Dwight, Kevin, and Jane, stated they possess excellent environmental sustainability knowledge. These three similarly said that they are aware of the positive impact of recycling and resource management on the environment.

On top of that, both Dwight and Jane said that they read many news articles and debates about sustainability, making them aware of sustainable development's importance. All participants answered that they are unsure where the money goes when a company charge more for being environmentally friendly. Michael, Dwight, and Pam said that they do not know where the money is going, especially in high-involvement products such as airplane tickets where you are offered to pay extra for the flight to be environmentally compensated. However, when it comes to low-involvement products such as ecological milk they are more confident in knowing where



the money is going. Kevin, Jane, Jim, and Bob answered that they believe the money is helping the environment even though they are not 100% sure where the money is going. Some participants had knowledge of specific industries that they had some experience with. However, they were always critical because they did not have complete insight into where the money went. All participants answered that they experience a lack of information in terms of communicating where the extra money is going. Stephany, Alex, and Carl had some insight into that more environmental product are more expensive to produce, which made them willing to pay for more green products.

All twelve participants tried to be environmentally conscious in their everyday actions. Some participants are very engaged in sustainable development since they care about the planet and society's being. Moreover, since they care about sustainability, they try to support brands that perceive themselves as sustainable and brands that seem to want to make a positive impact on the planet. Further, some participants like Kevin and Jane argue that they want to make as sustainable choices as possible if the price does not exceed what they can afford. However, Dwight mentioned that there are certain products he is more engaged towards since he thinks they have a more significant positive impact than others, as he mentioned he instead pays extra for sustainable clothes than ecological milk since he thinks that the environmental benefits from the clothes are more significant than from the milk. Some participants, like Meredith, believed that everybody in society could be more involved in sustainable development and for that reason, they argued that sustainable development can be taken even more seriously by people in society to minimize their environmental impact.

Many participants said that they would want to spend the extra money for the environmentally friendly product, but a few of them felt that they could not always afford to pay extra for the more sustainable alternative. However, Dwight said that now that he is working compared to when he was a student, he can spend the extra money. Dwight also mentioned that he is more likely



to spend extra on clothes “because I do not want my shirt from unsustainable material.” Some participants argue that buying environmentally friendly products was more straightforward for low-involvement products like milk and cucumber. However, it still depended on the price difference between a “normal” product and a better product for the environment. As mentioned before, the choices became a lot harder for pricier products, which could be stated as high-involvement products. However, participants like Kevin and Jane always strive to buy a product that is as sustainable as possible. Bob and Jim argued that sustainable choices regarding low-involvement products have become more challenging in the last year due to inflation pushing up some prices. Participants like Stephany and Alex did, in many cases, choose the more environmentally friendly alternative even though the product where more expensive. They knew that the sustainable alternative often was more expensive to produce and was, for that reason, willing to pay.

All participants answered that social media was the dominant form of communication that they had experienced. The participants said that most of the communication comes from adverts on social media such as Facebook and Instagram but also ads via mail. Many participants said that they often only notice the ads when they are published by a brand they know. Apart from social media, participants like Kevin and Jim also experience much environmental communication on billboards, buses, and trains around Sweden. The ads on buses they remember the most are often from companies like Länstrafiken and SJ, where they claim certain things like public transport are better for the environment. Jim also mentioned an ad campaign from Skånetrafiken where they claimed that all of their buses in Malmö were running on sustainable fuel like rapeseed oil. Stephany, Alex, Carl, and Meredith believed that companies' sustainable communication comes mainly from TV and Youtube commercials. They were thinking about communication from car brands that communicate the sustainable development of their products.

Participants 1 to 8 all answered that the form of communication which catches their attention the most is video adverts. Kevin, Pam, and Angela



mentioned that serious videos highlighting the negative aspects of environmental problems get their attention the most and make them more aware and willing to act than if it were an advert in text form. Jim argued that he must see different ads based on which platform they are communicated on. For example, he preferred pictures over videos on Instagram, and on platforms like Youtube, he preferred a video over a photo. Participants 9-12 believed that communication in social media was the most relevant for sustainability. More specifically, influencers are the best way to communicate environmental information. Meredith believed that influencers collaborate with transparent companies and that the influences get more trustworthy because they can, in many cases, choose what companies they want to work with.

4.2 Consumer trust

The interpretation and trust regarding environmental messages from companies differed among the participants. Some said that they somewhat trusted the communicated information, and some said they did not trust the information. The majority said they somewhat trusted the information but were skeptical towards all messages. Meredith stated that she was optimistic towards all marketing communication and did trust the environmental claims. Participants Jane and Jim answered that they always look with a skeptical eye on the information when it comes to sustainability. Kevin states that it depends a lot on which company communicates the information. Further, Kevin thinks that brands he has had a relationship with before are more accessible to trust than smaller companies he does not know anything about. Another standard answer was that the participants were skeptical of the claims from a company since they thought that the claims were exaggerated or skewed for the company's gains.

All participants agreed that customer reviews influence their trust in brands. However, most of the participants feel that friends and family's previous experiences with a brand influenced them more than customer reviews



written by anonymous people online. In cases where no friends and family had experience with a specific company, the customer reviews online could also be seen to influence the participants. In some situations, the participants felt a lack of amount in reviews that could be found, and they felt that the information about the products was insufficient. Also, as Pam mentioned, it matters what details are given in the review about the product or service since Pam might not care or value a negative detail of the product that the review focused on. However, Michael stated that if he has read positive reviews, it primarily influences his trust towards the product instead of the brand. Furthermore, when Michael reads a negative review, it influences his trust negatively towards the brand instead of the product.

All participants that were interviewed agreed on their opinion that brand image influences their trust in a company. Participants Jim, Meredith, and Bob mentioned that their perception of a brand matters greatly regarding trust and claims from companies since they feel it is easier to believe in claims from well-known companies. Further, Jim mentioned that if a brand lies about its claims, he has difficulty forgiving smaller companies compared to big ones. Jim also argued that even though the company might be big, he could have difficulty forgiving them for claiming false information. This is because it depends on how big the false claim is.

Furthermore, participants like Jane state that companies she has a picture of are easier to forgive than small companies with fewer chances. This is something that Michael, Pam, and Angela also touched upon. They all said that they think it is easier for them to rebuild their trust in a big brand that they are aware of compared to a small brand they have never tried a product from. Michael compared a solid and well-known brand to a close friend, he can still trust his close friend after a misstep. Moreover, the small unknown company was compared to a stranger. If a stranger does something weird the first time they meet, Michael will not trust them again, the same goes for a small and unknown brand. Stephany, Alex, and Carl believed more in the smaller brand because they have more connections with the company.



Stephany stated that more significant firms get distanced from the consumers and lose the credibility of always prioritizing their consumers.

The interviewees were given examples of environmentally friendly products; all participants could see some benefits with the products they value except for one product. Paying extra to get a flight climate compensated was the only product the participants needed clarification on since they needed to know where the money was going. However, if some information were communicated about this, they would all value the benefits of compensating for the climate. Jim and Stephanie felt that buying more sustainable products created a feeling of better conscience and that they had made something good for other people, which they perceived as a benefit. Bob and Kevin connect green products with high quality and better raw materials since they usually have to pay extra to receive the product. However, if a company can prove that their products are produced during good working conditions, they also receive a form of benefit according to them. The most common benefit which the participants answered for almost all products was that they had less impact on the environment.

All participants could identify some risks of the products given as examples. Pam and Angela said that even if there are many benefits marketed in a product, there are often adverse side effects, for example, electric cars. They could identify many benefits with the electric car, but they said there is still a risk since producing the batteries for the car has a negative impact on the environment. Stephany and Alex defined a few risks connected to the lack of knowledge about more sustainable products. Many consumers have not tested more sustainable products as the “original ” products, which can make the material used less durable and worse quality. This factor made them define a higher risk of environmentally friendly products. Jim mentioned that his risk in buying environmentally friendly products is relatively small compared to “normal” ones. However, he sometimes worries if companies' claims are true and not something they do to push the price. Michael and



Dwight also gave examples of a risk where they pay extra for environmental compensation and do not know where the money is going. However, this problem only referred to high-involvement products, since with low-involvement products such as milk, they are confident in knowing more about what the money is being used for.

5 Analysis

The analysis identifies the connections between the empirical data and the literature described in the theoretical framework. The investigation has identified four factors that influence trust regarding environmental sustainability claims. The four parts are the outcome of the identified themes from the empirical investigation.

5.1 Lack of information in environmental sustainability claims creates distrust towards companies

The semi-structured interviews generated data that the authors have themed. Regarding environmental knowledge, one recurring answer was that the participants have good environmental knowledge within certain industries



compared to others. With their good knowledge of environmental sustainability, the participants felt that they were missing crucial information in the claims made by the companies. Further, since consumers are more aware of environmental sustainability, they are also better at seeing if a company is skewing their information or not. One example from the interview was that some participants said they possessed a good knowledge of recycling and groceries. However, in the tech industries, they do not possess knowledge of what they do in recycling and groceries. This can be connected to Bernyte's (2018) statements that people have started to become more conscious in regard to environmental sustainability. However, there are still improvements to be made. This can be connected to the participants' answers in the interviews when stating that they only have good knowledge in industries they have experience with, leaving more knowledge to be gained in other industries to make them more sustainable. This can be due to what Leonidou, Gruber, and Schlegelmilch (2022) stated about individuals not believing in the importance and having a responsibility to make a positive impact and act towards environmental sustainability. As Leonidou, Gruber, and Schlegelmilch (2022) mentioned, the environmental sustainability process starts with beliefs from the individuals which in turn makes them aware of their responsibility to act more consciously. Furthermore, in the interviews, another common answer from participants was that they do not act as environmentally conscious in industries where they do not possess the knowledge within. However, the participants said that if they had knowledge of other industries, they would also start to act more sustainably in these industries. Some participants mentioned that the industries where they do not possess that much knowledge is industries where companies do not really communicate environmental improvements.

Another theme generated from the empirical data is that the participants have difficulty trusting the information communicated. The participants answered that they tend to feel like the information communicated is exaggerated and skewed for the company's own gain. This can also be connected to the moments of concern which Lim et al. (2013) studied. The participants not



trusting the information can therefore be related to Lim et al. (2013) statements about consumers getting a sense of distrust in the communicated benefits since they do not know where the money is going because of the lack of information. It can also be related to caution, which Lim et al. (2013) mentioned that consumers spend more time researching green products they are considering purchasing. This can therefore be connected to the participants' knowledge within the product industry, since they possess useful knowledge about the industry, they might feel like there is essential information that is skewed or missing from companies. On the other hand, in industries where they do not have good knowledge the information might be hard to define as skewed or missing. This could be connected to what Rogala and Bialowas (2016) mentioned about how consumers possess the competence and therefore companies need to communicate the information in a clear way in order for the consumers to trust and believe the information. Otherwise, they are running the risk of experiencing what Lim et al. (2013) mentioned about consumers not trusting the information communicated.

Whilst lack of information could be seen as a problem for companies when communicating environmental sustainability claims the platform where the message is communicated is also of great importance. In the interviews where participants answered that they sometimes experience communication from companies that are communicated through the wrong channels and wrong message and, therefore might not catch their attention. Furthermore, when a message does not catch their attention, they instead ignore the message. Consumers experiencing that companies provide the wrong message can be connected to Lim et al. (2013) study, where they mentioned that many consumers sometimes feel that they do not actually know if a product is green and experience a lack of information about the actual environmental performance from the companies. Consumers experiencing that the communication is provided on the wrong platform can also be related to what Rogala and Bialowas (2016) mentioned about marketing communication being heavily dominated by modern technology. Having the feeling of receiving communication on the wrong platform can therefore be



because the companies have not adapted their communication to modern technology (Rogala and Bialowas, 2016). A standard answer from the participants was that video adverts that highlight the negative aspects of environmental problems get their attention the most, therefore following the data from the interviews companies should try to adapt their communications to videos focusing on the problems that have occurred to nature which the company's products are claimed not to be as harmful.

Further in the interviews, the participants answered that in the example of paying extra money for climate compensation, their purchase of a product does not increase their perception of the value of a product. This was due to not knowing where the extra money they are paying is going since all of the participants felt like there was a lack of information from all companies providing this service on what they are doing with the extra money in order to climate compensate for their purchase of the product. This can be related to Guerrerio and Pacheco's (2021) study where they mention that when consumers are processing claims credibility is an important factor influencing the perceived value and trust towards a brand. Therefore, if the purchase of a product does not equal the perceived value of the consumer the trust towards that company might be damaged since the company had communicated their information in the wrong way. Since consumers do not value paying extra money for climate compensation because they do not know where the money is going, it can also be connected to the concept of perceived risk. As Bauer (1960) mentions perceived risk is the risk consumers have to make purchasing a product, in this case, the risk is that the consumers do not know where the extra money is going which makes the purchase a risk since they do not know what the company is doing to compensate for their purchase. This can further be connected to one of the characteristics Kotler (1972) mentions about financial risk. Financial risk refers to the consumer not wasting unnecessary money. It was clear from the participant's opinions that it was a waste of money since there was a lack of information.



From the data gathered, the authors identified patterns of what triggers consumers' trust towards environmental claims. One recurring pattern was that for almost every concept asked in the interviews, the participants answered that there is a lack of communication within the claims. The lack of communication was brought up in environmental knowledge, perceived value, perceived risk, and consumer trust which showcases that lack of information is a major factor that hinders consumers to trust environmental claims. Therefore, to increase the perceived value and minimize the risk companies should provide more information about their environmental performances and how it is handled. This in turn would also create a stronger brand image according to the participants of the interviews. Which would lead to the consumers trusting the brand. Otherwise, if the companies still provide a lack of information the consequences could be that the consumers do not trust their claims since they only see the risk in purchasing the product.

5.2 Consumers' knowledge & engagement influence perceptions of a brand

Another part identified from the analysis is the pattern that customers' trust towards companies is triggered by customer reviews online and reviews from friends and family. In regards to knowledge and engagement of environmental sustainability, the data from the empirical results showed that when the participants are evaluating a claim, they often engage themselves with reviews of the brand and product to create better knowledge. The data from the interviews further showed that all of the participants are influenced by customer reviews, either negatively or positively. This is related to the results from both Soares, Dolci, and Lunardi (2022) and Roza, Octavia, and Sriayudha (2022) studies which showcased those reviews have a strong influence on building trust towards a brand. As Soares, Dolci, and Lunardi (2022) mentioned in their study, consumers that have read positive reviews on a product are more likely to form trust towards that brand, this correlates



to the data from the interviews since a recurring theme from the participants was that positive reviews increase their trust in that brand. A common answer from the participants was also that negative reviews decrease their trust in the brand which Soares, Dolci, and Lunardi (2022) also mention in their study. However, some of the participants in the interviews answered that positive reviews increase their trust in the product more than the brand. When there are negative reviews, it decreases their trust in the brand more than the product. This is somewhat contradicting what Soares, Dolci, and Lunardi (2022) state, since from this research the participants' trust was increased in the product instead of the brand. This can be due to the fact that consumer trust is something that develops over time which Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Pervan (2015) mentioned. Therefore, reading some reviews does not make the consumer feel as secure and confident in that there is no risk in purchasing the product since they have only read a review and not had any experience with it. As Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Pervan (2015) further explained, consumer trust is formed through previous experience which in turn forms predictability and dependability, this can be connected to why the participants did not feel that a positive review did not influence trust toward the brand since that is something which is formed over time, therefore influencing their trust towards the product more.

By trusting the brand, the participants said it is easier for them to trust an environmental claim from the company. Compared to if they only formed trust in the product which would lead to the participants not trusting the claims from the companies as easily. The majority of the participants stated that friends and family and customer reviews have an influence on their trust in companies. Some participants also mentioned that they value customer reviews of friends and family more than “random” customer reviews online. This could be connected to what Soares, Dolci, and Lunardi (2022) mentioned about that customers are more influenced by reviews from friends and family rather than reviews from random people online. One of the participants Michael stated that he would value a friend's opinion and review of a product higher compared to a customer review online since he often



values relatives' reviews higher especially if he knows that they have knowledge within that industry. This could occur since customer reviews online are made by anonymous people whom the participants do not know and do not know what kind of knowledge they have when it comes to certain products. Mal, Davies, and Diers-Lawson (2018) state that there is a difference between evaluating a brand's quality and reliability compared to evaluating how the company communicates. From the data gathered it is clear that the concept of customer reviews is more connected to a customer's evaluation of a brand's quality and reliability. Since the reviews tend not to evaluate the communication from the company.

Further, based on empirical data and the analysis it is clear that customer reviews trigger customers' perception of products and brands. The customers see risks with environmental claims since they do not trust the claims completely. Therefore, they look up customer reviews, and these can both increase and decrease the perceived value of green products. If the review is positive, it can increase their perception of the value of the product which in turn makes them trust the brand more. This is due to consumers' perceived risk decreases and the perceived value increases. Therefore, customer reviews, perceived value, and risk are a pattern that companies need to understand in order to create a trusting relationship with consumers. Thus, knowledge and engagement are important patterns in creating trust in consumers since consumers engage themselves in customer reviews in order to gain more knowledge.

Another pattern that was identified within knowledge and engagement is that brand image has a strong influence on perceived value, risk, engagement, and knowledge. This due to a strong brand makes the consumer more engaged towards the brand since they keep informed and therefore create knowledge about the brand. This is because they value the benefits of the brand and its products, with perceived value and other concepts forming trust towards the company. However, this can work in the opposite way as well if the brand



has a bad reputation and the consumers have knowledge about their bad reputation it will not increase their perceived value instead it would increase their perceived risk in purchasing from that brand.

From the data gathered from the interviews, a recurring theme from the participants was that they are more involved and keep being informed if they have a close and connected relationship with the brand. This goes in line with what Kwon et al. (2021) stated that having a strong relationship between companies and consumers increases the consumers' engagement. Further, a common answer from the participants was that they are more likely to trust a strong brand than brands they have never heard of before. This can be connected with Selvakumar and Artshi (2019) who stated that brand image is a major factor when consumers decide to purchase a green product. The participants said that a brand's image could influence their trust in companies positively or negatively depending on the brand's reputation. However, the participants further explained that they are more likely to regain trust in a strong brand than in a brand they do not know. One of the participants described that a strong brand can be compared to a close friend he still can trust after a mistake. Further, the participant explained that a “weak” brand could be compared with a stranger who does something wrong the first time they interact and therefore he will not trust him again. The same goes for the “weak” brand. However, another participant stated that smaller firms have a better connection with the consumer than bigger companies which are more distanced. Selvakumar and Artshi (2019) further mentioned that perceived value influences brand trust, since consumers increase their perceived value due to factors such as quality. This can explain the different opinions of the participants since they simply value different qualities.

Out of the interviews it has become clear that the participants most times give strong brands more chances even if one of their environmental sustainability claims might not be true. As mentioned, the participants compared a strong versus a weak brand to a close friend and a stranger they



just met. However, smaller firms have a better chance of creating a strong relationship with consumers. Therefore, it's important for companies to work with creating a strong brand that consumers trust and where they feel that the perceived risk is low and the perceived value is high.

5.3 Consumers support companies that are making genuine improvements rather than maximizing their profits

Another pattern identified during the analysis was that the participants wanted to buy as sustainable products as possible as long as the price was right. The price of the green product could be connected with one's environmental knowledge, engagement, and the perceived value and risk of the product.

In regards to perceived value, the participants valued different things in regard to the extra benefits provided by the product examples they were given. Some of the participants valued the environmental improvements of a product more than others. This can be due to what Patterson and Spring (1997) touch upon that consumers' own interpretation of what they value is different from individual to individual. Therefore, it is hard for everyone to build trust in a brand since people value different factors. A common answer was that the participants valued the extra benefits of a product if the extra benefits were environmentally sustainable, these participants can be related to what Zeithaml, (1988) describes as the third factor which creates perceived value, which is that the customer is the most focused on the main benefit of the product. In turn, these participants said that purchasing these environmentally sustainable products gave them a better conscience through doing something good for other people, which they also valued as an extra benefit.

Another common answer was that the participants valued the product if it was a reasonable price, if it had a price tag which is too expensive, they



would not value the product as highly. This can be connected to another factor Zeithaml, (1988) mentions the price being a factor that influences the consumer's perception of a product and brand. In the participants' opinion, it became clear that price is a dominant factor influencing their perception of the value. Another dominant factor was how much impact the environmental improvements had. If the participants did not perceive the benefits of the product as having a positive impact on the environment, they would not perceive the value as high, even if there were extra sustainable benefits that were communicated. How much more positive impact mattered to the participants than just receiving communication that it is positive. The interviewees therefore do not care too much about improvements being made instead on how much improvements have been made which generated more perceived value for the consumers. This can be connected to what Chen and Chang (2012) said, consumers perceived value increases through communicated environmental performances but if the sustainable actions do not perform as well as communicated, they do not perceive any value from the product. Further, Amri et al. (2019) and Wilkins, Shazam, and Megicks (2021) describe that there is a connection between consumer trust and perceived value due to the fact that perceived value affects the overall satisfaction of the consumers. This could be connected with this study since some participants argued that they feel a lack of information connected to the products when it comes to the environmental sustainability claim. This could lead to the consumers worrying about the purchase and the overall satisfaction they gain from the purchase and instead not valuing the extra benefits. Which leads to that perceived value having a negative influence on consumer trust.

Some participants from the interviews stated that they always try to support sustainable brands that genuinely try to make a good impact on the climate. However, the interview participants are always critical of environmental sustainability claims since they know that these messages could be skewed or exaggerated for the company's benefit. However, if the participants have knowledge within a specific industry, they mostly know if the message and



claim are skewed or not. Therefore, as Lam Lau and Cheung (2016) described, it is important for companies to genuinely communicate their environmental sustainability improvements. If they communicate genuinely, they also increase the chance for consumers to evaluate the purchase higher but also the overall satisfaction of the purchase.

Further, the majority of the participants felt that the core benefit of the product and the overall quality was better in the more sustainable alternative because the consumers felt that this alternative was more tested. But on the other hand, some participants did experience that the environmentally friendly product was worse than the original, which made them less willing to buy the more green alternative. This can be related to Chen and Chang, (2012) who state that the most important factor is to deliver a product that highlights the core benefit. It can be seen that consumers have experienced products that are more sustainable than losing the core benefit. Which damages the perceived value of the sustainable alternative. Therefore, it is important for companies that try to make environmentally sustainable improvements not to lose the core value of the product. Otherwise, they are running a risk of losing customers based on their perceived value.

Based on the empirical data, it is clear that the participants that are environmentally conscious and have the knowledge and are engaged in sustainability also know if a price is reasonable or if the price is set to maximize companies' profits. Further, therefore it's important for consumers that companies set the right prices on their products and not take sustainability as an opportunity to maximize profits. As mentioned previously, if the environmental sustainability claim is too good to be true and lacks information on how this claim is handled in practice, it also makes the participants less willing to pay more for a product that is claimed to be sustainable. And since the participants want to be a part of sustainable development it is important that the price is set based on a balance between companies' profits, and customers and contribution to positive sustainable



environmental development. The participants from the interviews also expressed that they expect the sustainable choice to be pricier, however, this price needs to be reasonable in comparison to the price of a “normal” product. It is also important for companies to genuinely try to improve their sustainability work instead of claiming improvements to maximize profits since the data shows that consumers care about how much improvements are made.

5.4 Improving communicated information helps consumers to see the extra benefits of the claim, product, and brand

In regards to the evaluation of products, the data from the interviews showed that in the process of evaluating a claim and product, the participants had in mind the values of the green benefits and if they can believe in those benefits. This can be connected to perceived value and perceived risk. From the model presented by Murphy and Enis (1986) mentioning four characteristics for perceived risk, financial risk was the only one the participants of the interviews emphasized. Instead of the other three aspects from Kotler (1972), the participants brought another aspect forward. This aspect that some of the participants felt like when a brand communicates the extra benefits, the consumers thought that there is always a negative side effect of their improvements. For example, they mentioned electric cars; they all valued those cars do not emit nearly as much as diesel cars. However, the production of car batteries has large negative impacts on the climate, which the participants mentioned as a negative side effect making it somewhat of a perceived risk. Thus, the participants had in mind the value of the extra benefits but still saw some risk since they felt like there always is a negative side effect of a large improvement in regard to environmental sustainability.



As previously mentioned, participants from the interviews value factors such as previous customer reviews when evaluating whether a product is worth buying. This is because they value green benefits, but however, they know that environmental sustainability claims could be skewed by companies in order to make a profit. This could be connected to Chen (2009), who described that green brand image, satisfaction, and green trust positively affect the image of a brand. Therefore, it is important for companies that want to expand in a sustainable market to build a green brand image and increase the satisfaction of consumers. Further, Chen (2009) describes that if companies use a green market to have higher prices, the consumers that are engaged and have knowledge within the industry will also sooner or later know if the claims and the prices are skewed or not. If environmental sustainability claims are genuinely communicated and the efforts are genuine the company has a chance of increasing brand satisfaction and therefore creating a competitive advantage. Further, the participants from the interview stated that companies that genuinely try to make improvements to the environment are also easier for them to support.

Another pattern identified in evaluating claims and products is that consumers often do not know where the money they are paying extra is going. This is related to the lack of information in the claims from the companies. As previously mentioned, the consumers do not know where the money is going since the companies often just communicate that if they pay extra their purchase will get climate compensated but never mention in detail how it gets compensated with the extra money the consumer spends. This can also be connected to perceived risk since the consumers see a risk in wasting their money, which is exactly what Kotler (1972) stated in his study consumers feel a risk in spending unnecessary money.

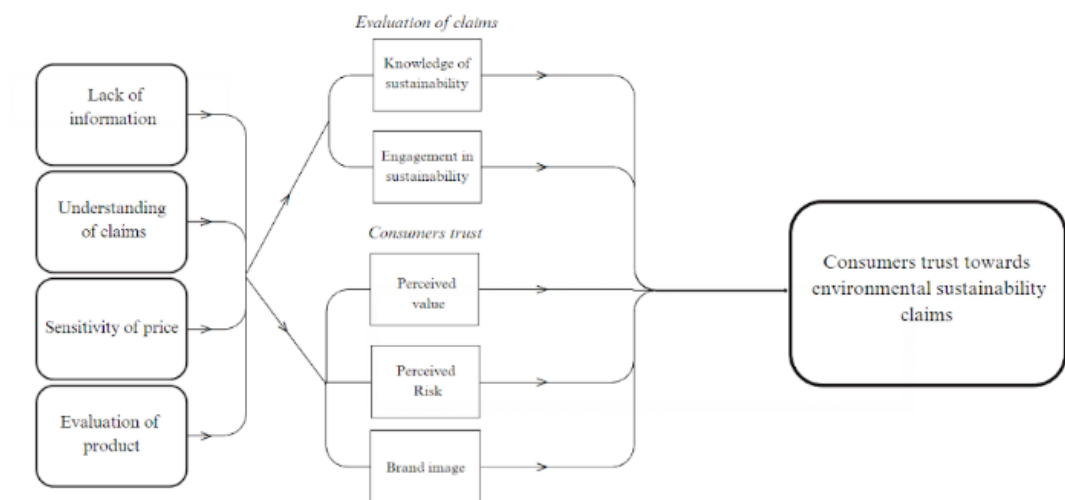
Therefore, in the process of evaluating the products and claims from companies, the consumers consider the risk of purchasing, the value of extra benefits, brand image, and a lack of information. Thus, for companies to build trust with the consumers, the companies need also to consider these factors which the consumers have in mind. A lot of this could be solved by



improving the information the companies communicate to the consumers since that would minimize the risk and increase the perceived value and also how they view the brand. Further, the interview participants stated that they always want to support brands that genuinely try to impact the environment and communicate these improvements.

5.5 New conceptual model

The four factors discovered are lack of information, understanding of claims, the sensitivity of price, and evaluation of products. The model demonstrates that the two parts in the evaluation of the claims and the three parts in consumer trust are all connected to the four themes that influence consumers' trust towards environmental sustainability claims.



6 Conclusion

In light of this evidence, it becomes clear that an important factor that is missing to create trust is the lack of information communicated within the



environmental sustainability claims made by companies. The lack of information was in this research found to influence perceived value, perceived risk, and brand image. This is due to consumers not knowing where the extra money they pay is going since companies do not provide much information about how the extra money will be handled. Therefore, it becomes a risk for the consumer to unnecessarily spend more money than they need to, which also leads to a decrease in perceived value and the company's brand image. Thus, to create a trust for consumers, companies can provide more information in their environmental sustainability claims in order to minimize consumers' perceived risk and instead build a relationship of trustworthiness. By providing more information in the communication, it becomes easier for consumers to see the value in the extra benefits.

From this research, it was found that consumers care about how much environmental improvements are made and if the company does it to genuinely make a positive impact or if they only want to maximize their profits. It has become clear that companies that genuinely try to make improvements that help the environment are also the companies that consumers will trust the most. Since customers based on this research have the knowledge and are engaged in sustainable development. Therefore, companies that use environmental sustainability claims as a way of maximizing profits are running the risk of losing customers in the end. Out of the researchers' analysis, it has become clear that if companies genuinely communicate their sustainable improvements, it also increases the chance for consumers to evaluate the brand, purchase, and, therefore overall satisfaction higher. Further, based on the empirical data, the consumers who have the knowledge and are engaged in sustainability also know if a price is reasonable or just set to maximize profits for a company. Customers nowadays also expect the price for sustainable products to be higher than “normal” products. Therefore, the price for sustainable products needs to be based on a balance between the consumers and companies' profits but also contributing to a more environmentally sustainable development.

Furthermore, engagement and knowledge create trust for the consumers, and



to be engaged, it is important that the price is not too “expensive” since if it is too high, they rather purchase the cheaper non-environmental option.

Another way for consumers to create trust through engagement and knowledge is through the help of customer reviews. Positive customer reviews help consumers to get rid of potential risks and instead focus on the value from the extra benefits. Further, by an increase in perceived value, the customers also get a better perception of the product and brand. It was found that positive reviews had more impact on consumer trust towards the product rather than the brand itself since it takes more than a review to create trust toward a brand. To create trust towards the brand consumers, need to have some experience with the product and the brand.

In this research, it could also be concluded that negative customer reviews can have the opposite consequences since the perceived risk increases. However, based on the author's findings, negative reviews decrease consumers' trust in the brand more than the product.

Therefore, from this research, the authors can conclude factors that can create trust in consumers' evaluation of environmental sustainability claims. The first factor is providing more information in the communicated claims to provide the consumers with knowledge. Secondly, consumers create trust towards companies that genuinely want to positively impact the environment rather than companies that only seek to maximize profits. Lastly, customer reviews and brand image help the consumers in regards to creating trust since it helps them to get rid of potential risks they see in the claim, product, and brand.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to the research field of creating consumer trust by confirming theories made by other researchers within this research area and



providing some new intelligence on creating trust. The current research states that customer reviews have an influence on creating consumer trust. Soares, Dolci, and Lunardi (2022) mention that positive reviews influence consumers' trust in a brand, and negative reviews influence it in the opposite way. However, this research also contributed to finding that positive reviews influence consumers' trust towards the product more than the brand since it takes more than a review to make them trust the brand. To trust the brand, they instead need some experience with their product. This study also contributes to the research by providing knowledge on how negative reviews influence consumers' trust towards the brand rather than the product.

This research also contributes to the research field by providing evidence that companies do not communicate enough information in their environmental sustainability claims. Lee et al (2019) state that the aim for companies is for the consumers to perceive as little risk as possible since having high perceived risk results in customers not purchasing or trusting the brand. On the other hand, Perceived value is described by previous research in terms of affecting the overall satisfaction of consumers, which increases the potential for building loyal customers (Amri et al, 2019) (Wilkins, Shazam, and Megicks,2021). This research contributes to the concepts of perceived value and risk by showcasing the importance of communicating more information in the company's environmental sustainability claims. Providing more information in the claims will help consumers get rid of potential risks they considered and instead help them see the value of the extra benefits.

6.2 Practical Implications

This research investigated the consumer perspective of creating trust toward environmental sustainability claims. And with the results from this study, the authors can provide a framework for companies with factors to consider for



creating consumer trust. The dominant factor found in this study was that consumers are missing crucial information within the environmental sustainability claims. This study, therefore, recommends companies to provide more knowledge to the consumers in order for them to eliminate any potential risk they see. The risk consumers considered when there was a lack of information was that they did not know where their extra money was going or how positive the environmental improvements really were. Companies that genuinely try to make a positive impact with their environmental sustainability claims also increase their chance of generating long-lasting and loyal customers. As previously mentioned in the study, companies that use environmental sustainability claims as an opportunity to maximize profits will also be revealed as skewing their environmental sustainability claims sooner or later. This is due to the fact that customers nowadays are more engaged and have more knowledge of environmental sustainability. Therefore, it is these two aspects companies need to provide more knowledge to their consumers in order for the consumers to see the value of the extra benefits and positively influence their perception of the brand. In turn, this would lead to the consumers creating trust in the company's environmental sustainability claims.

7 Limitations and Future Research

The following chapter describes the study's limitations and how future research could be conducted.

7.1 Limitations

In this study, there were some limitations. One limitation of this research is that the participants of this study's interviews already had pre-knowledge within the field of environmental sustainability. Therefore, the results from this study can not be generalized to a wider population since it has only covered people with good knowledge within the field and not people who have not got the knowledge. This was due to the sampling method applied for this research which was purposive sampling. The authors only sampled



individuals who could contribute to the study by applying purposive sampling. Another limitation is that the sample size of the study was 12 participants. This also results in not being able to generalize the results of this study to a wider population since the sample size is too small to represent a larger population's opinions regarding environmental sustainability claims.

Another limitation of the study is that all of the participants that the authors interviewed are based in Sweden. Therefore, this study might only be helpful for European companies rather than the whole world. And since this is a qualitative study, this research is not generalizable for a wider population since the sample size is too narrow.

7.2 Future Research

Future research can use the authors research in terms of developing the theoretical model that the authors have created. Since this research was conducted with purposive sampling future researchers should take into consideration and research based on a quantitative study in order to make the results generalizable. This research focused on exploring what influences customers' trust regarding environmental sustainability claims and therefore certain conclusions like “lack of information” in the claims were found. Therefore, future research should focus on developing a framework for how companies should communicate environmental sustainability claims to different platforms and segments.



Furthermore, future research should also focus on taking a different methodological approach than purposive sampling and instead of conducting interviews on people that have good environmental knowledge and engagement. Instead, they should focus on interviewing or conducting research on people with all kinds of environmental knowledge and engagement. This in order to be able to represent a larger population's opinions of environmental sustainability claims. Another interesting topic for future research could be to do the same research but in a different country. Since this study was based in Sweden and all participants were Swedish it would be interesting to see the opinions from different countries and see how they differ or agree. Furthermore, since this study was based on purposive sampling the authors only requirement for the interviews was that the participants had knowledge and were engaged within environmental sustainability. Therefore, future research could be conducted by choosing specific demographics such as specific ages, origins and gender.

Future research could also use the results of this study and apply it to specific industries in order to construct a new framework for a specific industry. This due to consumer trust is created differently in particular industries. Therefore, more variables could be added or taken away when studying consumer trust in one specific industry.



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Appendix



Appendix 1

Note that the appendices have separate pagination and that they have to be listed manually in table of contents.

Concept	Component	Item	Questions	Reference
Consumers' trust in environmental Sustainability claims	Environmental Engagement	Knowledge about sustainability	How much knowledge do you have about sustainability overall?	Salnikova, Strizhakova, and Coulter (2022)
		Sustainable compensating	If a company charges extra to be more environmentally friendly do you know where the extra money goes? example	Jørgensen, Pedersen and Skard, 2021)
		Engagement	How engaged are you in sustainable development?	Leonidou, Gruber, and Schlegelmilch (2022)
		Practical contribution	Do you often buy more environmentally friendly products even if they cost more? Why?	Jørgensen, Pedersen and Skard, 2021)



Environmental messages	Communication identification	What type of environmental communication have you experienced?	Lim et al. (2013)
	Preferable communication	Is there one form of environmental communication you prefer over others?	Lim et al. (2013)
Consumer Trust	Trust of message	Do you believe the information communicated?	Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy, and Pervan (2015)
	Reviews	Do customer reviews influence your trust in brands? Why, why not? Do friends and family influence you more?	Soares, Dolci and Lunardi (2022)
	Brand reputation	Do you feel any risk if you were to buy any of these products? If so, why?	Kwon et al. (2021)



Brand image	Brand loyalty	Why are you loyal to a brand? Are you more loyal to a brand that you trust?	Selvakumar and Artshi (2019)
Perceived value	Product benefit	What benefits do you value from these products? (examples)	Zeithaml, (1988)
Perceived risk	Risk	Do you feel any risk if you were to buy any of these products? If so, why?	(Bauer, 1960)

Appendix 2:

Since the participants were anonymous they were given aliases.

Interview 1: Michael

Interview 2: Dwight

Interview 3: Pam

Interview 4: Angela

Interview 5: Kevin

Interview 6: Jane

Interview 7: Jim

Interview 8: Bob

Interview 9: Stephany



Interview 10: Alex

Interview 11: Carl

Interview 12: Meredith

Theming schedule

Themes	Codes
Lack of Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some industries do not communicates their environmental performance• Lack of information in the claims• Willing to pay if they have the knowledge and information• Not 100% sure where the money is going• Critical because no full insight• Trust most messages but are always skeptical• Never 100% believes in messages• Messages can be skewed for companies own gain• Want to trust the claims but some are exaggerated
Knowledge and engagement of Environmental sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Good knowledge within specific industries• Read news and listen to debates• Trying to be environmentally conscious



	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make sustainable choice when given the opportunity• Act more sustainable when they believe that they matter• Support green brand as long it not to expensive• Trust primary data from consumers• Reviews influences trust in brand• Checks reviews about product/brand before purchase• Easier to forgive bigger brands than smaller ones• Smaller brands have better connections with their consumers.• Brand image
Sensitivity of the price and knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do not know were money is going in high involvement products• Better knowledge in low involvement products• Easier to pay extra for low involvement products• Green products often cost more to produce• Choice green products when they are not to expensive• Green products cost more, more willing to pay• Brand image
Evaluation of the products	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Values the green benefit• Some perceive green products with higher quality



	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feel more conscience• Do not know where extra money is going• Always a side effect• Risk is lower in low involvement products• The claimed environmental performance could be skewed• Less tested compared with “normal” products• Reviews influence the evaluation of products• Brand image
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