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**Authenticity in sustainable branding and its effect
on consumers trust and loyalty**

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ABSTRACT:

Aitoudesta on tullut kuluttajille merkittävä tekijä viime aikoina, kun he miettivät minkä yrityksen tai brändin tuotteita tai toimintaa he haluavat tukea. Viherpesun yleistymisestä on tullut haaste, koska se on nostanut kuluttajien skeptisyyttä yritysten väitteitä ja tekoja kohtaan. Aitous voi toimia ratkaisuna tälle haasteelle, koska kun kuluttajat havaitsee yrityksen olevan aito, he luottavat yritykseen ja sen väitteisiin enemmän. Tutkielma perehtyy aitouteen kestävän brändäyksen kontekstissa ja miten aitous vaikuttaa kuluttajien luottamukseen ja uskollisuuteen. Tavoitteena on tuottaa ymmärrystä aitoudesta ja brändin aitoudesta, miksi se on tärkeää kuluttajille ja, kuinka tärkeää se on verrattuna muihin tekijöihin, kuten hintaan tai laatuun. Tutkielman tutkimuskysymykset ovat: Mitkä aitouden ulottuvuudet ovat tärkeimpiä kuluttajien luottamuksen rakentamisessa kestäviä brändejä kohtaan? Mikä rooli aitoudella on kuluttajien uskollisuuden luomisessa verrattuna muihin tekijöihin, kuten hintaan, laatuun tai mukavuuteen? Miten tunne-side brändiin vaikuttaa siihen, miten kestävän brändäyksen aitous liittyy brändiuskollisuuteen? Tutkielman tutkimuskysymyksiin vastattiin suorittamalla kirjallisuuskatsaus. Merkittäviksi tekijöiksi, jotka vaikuttavat kuluttajien luottamukseen aitouden lisäksi, havaittiin rehellisyys, läpinäkyvyys ja laatu. Läpinäkyvyys havaittiin myös merkittävänä tekijänä kestäville brändeille, varsinkin viherpesun takia. Kun kuluttajat havaitsee, että brändi on läpinäkyvä, he luottavat siihen enemmän, joka vähentää heidän huoltaan siitä, että yritys harjoittaa viherpesua. Yhteenvetona, tutkielman tulokset osoittavat, kuinka brändin aitous on tärkeä tekijä kuluttajien ostopäätöksissä.

KEYWORDS: Brändäys, Viherpesu, Markkinointi, Aitous, Kuluttajien luottamus, Brändin rakaus, vihreä aitous, Havaittu brändin aitous, Brändi uskollisuus, Luottamus

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1 Introduction

Branding is about building trust and maintaining a relationship between a customer and a company (Lipasti, 2025). Branding is a process in which perceptions and impressions of the company are developed and managed (Lipasti, 2025). Branding aims to create a certain image of a product, service, company or person. This branding image is intended to differentiate the company from the competition and attract customers (Vainio, 2025). Branding effectively communicates values, visions and missions. This helps consumers choose the best possible product based on criteria such as environmental impact or national considerations (Vainio, 2025).

Authenticity can be perceived in several ways, depending on the perspective from which it is viewed (He & Timothy, 2024). The word sincerity has more often been used as a synonym for authenticity to signify honesty and the practice of truthfulness in human relationships (He & Timothy, 2024). As a result, authenticity is seen as a requirement for successful social interactions (Varga & Guignon, 2014; Chatzopoulou & de Kiewiet, 2021). Terms that describe authenticity are “original” (Rust, 2006; Nunes et al., 2021) and “organic” (Kohli, 2011; Nunes et al., 2021).

Authenticity is an important factor for several reasons. For instance, authenticity increases emotional attachment and personal commitment to a company, service, or product (Södergren, 2021). Genuine experiences are a part of authenticity and therefore important to consumers, these experiences can lead to stronger brand loyalty and lasting connections with customers (Morhart et al., 2015; Södergren, 2021). Authenticity is also an important factor, because it builds trust (Södergren, 2021). When a brand is being authentic, consumers have built trust to it and therefore consumers are more forgiving to the brand, because they trust it (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2018; Södergren, 2021).

In sustainable branding, consumers can perceive authenticity and trust to the brand through transparency (Pizzetti et al., 2021). This is due to greenwashing, because if consumers perceive that the brand is transparent and honest with its claims, they will start

to believe it and think that it is not greenwashing (Pizzetti et al., 2021). Greenwashing is becoming more common, and it has weakened consumer trust in companies' environmental claims and their actual impact on society (Pizzetti et al., 2021). As a result, consumers who notice that a company is greenwashing are beginning to question the accuracy of all its environmental claims (Pizzetti et al., 2021). Numerous consumers have expressed that when a company states a product to be environmentally friendly, they immediately perceive this as a minor marketing tactic and doubt the product's true sustainability (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017; Li et al., 2023). This is very worrying, as a company's genuine efforts towards environmentally sustainable practices can be perceived negatively rather than positively by consumers (Chen & Chang, 2013; Li et al., 2023). Without trust in the company's claims, consumers cannot make informed decisions about their eco-friendly purchases (Szabo & Webster, 2021). Therefore, the legitimacy and trust of green companies must be improved (Szabo & Webster, 2021). Greenwashing harms a company's reputation, as hypocrisy reduces the company's credibility and worsens consumers' perception of its honesty (Ioannou et al., 2023). A previous study has shown that consumers who witness greenwashing, form a negative opinion and view the company as hypocritical (Ioannou et al., 2023), which reduces their satisfaction and trust in it (Ioannou et al., 2023).

A brand must remain accurate to its ideals and ensure that its activities are consistent with its message (Jian et al., 2019). Authenticity has a significant role in this, because authenticity is directly related on how consumers perceive a brand (Jian et al., 2019). There are several indicators of authenticity, such as accuracy and originality, that can be identified and used by consumers to make several opinions about if a brand being authentic (Nunes et al., 2021). These indicators are not replaceable but together influence the customer's perception of the consumer experience as either reasonably or significantly authentic (Newman, 2019). Previous research state that brand authenticity consists of three factors: brand consistency, brand customer orientation and congruence (Eggers et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2020). These three characteristics of brand authenticity are important in influencing consumers' perception of the brand (Portal et al., 2019).

Brand consistency means that a brand's commitments are consistent with the values, strategy and vision of the company (Eggers et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2020). Brand consistency promotes trust and loyalty, consumers will trust a brand if it is consistent with its values (Campagna et al., 2023). It is important that consumers' perception of the brand remains in line across every category, such as product, customer service and advertising (Eggers et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2020). Brand customer orientation refers to how well a company understands and fulfils the needs of its customers (Eggers et al., 2013; Fink et al., 2020). These needs do not include only practical services, but also emotional aspects and opportunities for self-expression (Portal et al., 2019). Brand congruence means that the company's and the brands values should match (Eggers et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2020). This is because the brands values become noticeable in customer experience and when employees, and especially management truly support the values of the brand it shows to the consumer in the customer experience (Eggers et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2020). Brand congruence is a key element when considering brand authenticity (Eggers et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2020). When employees feel that the brand is aligned with their values, they are authentically committed to the brand and not just out of duty (Portal et al., 2019).

Authenticity is in general studied by multiple research projects, but lack in specifying what are the most important aspects of authenticity, such as sincerity, heritage, quality and transparency in regards of trust (Nunes, 2021). The dimensions of perceived brand authenticity have been studied previously (Napoli et al., 2014; Jun & Yi, 2020), but their impact specifically on building trust in sustainable brands has been less studied (Lungwitz & Sjöstrand 2022; Szabo & Webster 2021). There is also not enough research made, where authenticity is compared to other determinants regarding consumer behavior, such as price or quality (Nunes, 2021). Although the relationship between brand loyalty and emotional attachment is well established, less research has been done on whether the emotional attachment between authenticity and loyalty works specifically in the context of sustainable branding (Safeer et al., 2023).

From the identified research gaps, in this thesis, I will be answering to the next research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What aspects of authenticity are most important in building consumer trust in sustainable brands?

RQ2: What roles does authenticity play in creating consumers loyalty in comparison to other factors such as price, quality or convenience?

RQ3: How does emotional connection to a brand mediate the relationship between authenticity in sustainable branding and brand loyalty?

1.1 Purpose and goals of the study

RQ1 answers to the question about what aspects of authenticity considering sustainable brands are most important when building consumer trust. RQ2 connects to RQ1 and tries to explain, what roles authenticity plays in shaping this consumer loyalty, when comparing to other factors, including price, quality and convenience. RQ3 answers to how emotional connection to a brand mediates the relationship between authenticity in sustainable branding and brand loyalty.

Research questions were answered by doing a literature review based on previous research and scientific articles. Literature was searched from using University of Vaasa, tritonia, finna -search engine and Google Scholar -search engine. Each articles abstract was read and estimated did it include information, which would answer at least one of the research questions. Each selected article was placed high in the JUFO-portal (Julkaistufoorumi). Only the articles were selected that had an impact factor 1 or more.

The free version of Grammarly was used through the research as a helping tool, making sure the sentences were correctly formed and making sure the academic language of the thesis.

This thesis consists of six chapters:

1. First chapter presents the subject and includes a review to authenticity and why it's an important factor. In this chapter the importance of this subject is discussed, and key concepts are introduced. In this chapter the purpose and goals of this study and research questions, methods and structure are introduced.
2. The second chapter answers to RQ1 with processing consumer trust, transparency and credibility, not forgetting greenwashing. In this chapter also Perceived brand authenticity (PBA) and perceived greenwashing are reviewed and why they are influential in building consumer trust in sustainable brands.
3. The third chapter answers to RQ2 and focuses on comparison factors compared to authenticity and what kind of affect they have on consumer loyalty when compared with authenticity.
4. The fourth chapter answers to RQ3 by defining what is brand loyalty and how positive and negative emotions to a brand effect on consumers perception of the brand and authenticity.
5. The fifth chapter summarizes key findings, restrictions and views of future of the research.
6. Sixth and final chapter ends the research.

2 RQ 1: What aspects of authenticity are most important in building consumer trust in sustainable brands?

This chapter will examine more in detail the important concepts related to the topic of the study, to make it easier to understand the study and its purpose. It will also examine how the different aspects of authenticity effect on consumers' trust.

Perceived brand authenticity (PBA) is a key factor in building consumer trust, especially for sustainable brands (Portal et al., 2019). PBA helps to reduce consumer skepticism and differentiates authentically sustainable brands from those brands that engage in green-washing, which is perceived as misleading green marketing (Lungwitz & Sjöstrand, 2022; Szabo & Webster, 2021). The most important factors of PBA are quality commitment, heritage and sincerity (Napoli et al., 2014; Mirzaei et al., 2022). These factors affect consumers' perceptions of a brand's authenticity and its ability to build trust.

PBA key factors	Description	References
Quality commitment	The brand's ability to provide high-quality products/services and deliver its promises. This is especially important for sustainable brands, as consumers are skeptical of sustainability claims	(Napoli et al., 2014; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020; Chen & Chang 2013; Li et al., 2023; Ewing et al., 2012).
Brand heritage	The brand's connection to tradition, culture, history and origin. A strong heritage adds to the experience of authenticity.	(Napoli et al., 2014; Napoli et al., 2016; Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Sincerity	The brand's loyalty to its values without compromise. Conveys honesty, which creates an emotional connection and increases trust.	(Napoli et al., 2014; Safeer et al., 2021; Safeer et al., 2023; Baca & Reshidi, 2025).
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Table 1: Perceived brand authenticity (PBA) key factors

Quality commitment is described as a brand that can provide high-quality products or services but also to carry out with its promises (see Table 1.) (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020). This is extremely important for sustainable brands, as consumers are skeptical of sustainability claims (Chen & Chang, 2013; Szabo & Webster, 2021). For example, Roh et al., (2022) found that consumers are more likely to trust brands, whose sustainability promises are concrete and based on facts, that can be proven, such as eco-labels and certificates, certified by a public authority.

Brand heritage refers to a brand's association with traditions, including cultures, practices, places and beliefs (see Table 1.) (Napoli et al., 2016; Mirzaei et al., 2022). When a brand has a strong historical background, perceived authenticity is increased (Napoli et al., 2016; Mirzaei et al., 2022). Consumers seek authenticity based on historical origins and narratives, which are all connected to brand heritage (Mirzaei et al., 2022). A brand's connection to its history and heritage adds to its authenticity (Napoli et al., 2016; Mirzaei et al., 2022).

In perceived brand authenticity, sincerity refers to a brand remaining loyal to its values and principles without compromises (see Table 1.) (Napoli et al., 2014; Jun & Yi, 2020). This means that consumers experience the brand as genuine and honest if its actions are not based only on commercial motives (Napoli et al., 2014; Jun & Yi, 2020). Consumers feel more connected to sincere and authentic brands, because they can trust that these brands deliver on their promises (Safeer et al., 2023). Perceived brand authenticity is a key concept, as consumers prefer authentic brands and companies (Safeer et al., 2021).

The three primary factors related to perceived brand authenticity (see Table 1.), include both the analysis of products and services and the emotional attachment associated with brand sincerity (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Lee & Eastin, 2021). The three PBA dimensions: sincerity, quality commitment and heritage have a positive influence on consumers' purchase intentions (Safeer et al., 2023).

From the consumer's perspective, PBA includes dimensions such as credibility, integrity, continuity and symbolism (Lungwitz & Sjöstrand, 2022). For consumers, credibility surrounds the perceptions that show that there is a positive relationship between a brand's credibility and its ability to engage in social actions (Morhart et al., 2015; Lee & Eastin, 2021). The alignment of a brand's activities with its ideals and purpose is defined by integrity (Morhart et al., 2015; Mirzaei et al., 2022), while continuity refers to a brand's relevance and ability to survive in future (Morhart et al., 2015; Mirzaei et al., 2022). Symbolism reflects to how a brand helps consumers build their sense of identity (Lungwitz & Sjöstrand, 2022).

It is important to recognize that brand trust and authenticity are closely related, even though they are different concepts (Napoli et al., 2014; Jun & Yi, 2020). When consumers view a brand as authentic, their trust in it increases (Lude & Prüggl, 2018; Jun & Yi, 2020). Brand trust means that consumers fully trust in a brand's ability to deliver on its promises (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Huang & Guo, 2021). Brand trust has two dimensions, these dimensions are cognitive trust and affective trust (Huang & Guo, 2021). Cognitive trust refers to trust in the capability and reliability of a brand, while affective trust refers to the emotional connection to a brand (Johnson & Grayson, 2005; Huang & Guo, 2021). Brand trust also influence on consumers purchase decisions (Lude & Prüggl, 2018; Papadopoulou et al., 2023). Brand authenticity influences various behaviors and attitudes, including trust (Bartsch et al., 2022). Brand trust therefore is a result of brand authenticity, because if a consumer perceives a brand as authentic, they also consider it to be truthful (Huang & Guo, 2021).

Sustainability has become a key concept for companies due to the increasing environmental awareness of consumers, considering global conditions (Foroudi & Palazzo, 2021). Sustainable branding covers concepts that focus on social responsibility, ethical considerations, and environmental sustainability (Foroudi & Palazzo, 2021). When comparing eco-friendly brands with non-eco-friendly brands, it is found that people are more likely to choose eco-friendly options (Olk, 2020). Many companies claim that their activities are environmentally sustainable, but in reality, they use greenwashing to ensure customer acceptance (Zhang, 2024). This leads to a conflict with authenticity, as buyers begin to question whether the brand's claims are genuine or simply an attempt to improve their image through greenwashing (Zhang, 2024). To maintain authenticity, companies must be transparent about their actions and convince their customers of their genuine environmentally sustainable practices (Zhang, 2024).

2.1 Consumer trust

Consumer trust is defined as “the consumer’s confidence in reliability and integrity” (Khamitov et al., 2024). Trust is a critical element in consumer research, it reduces perceived skepticism about other people’s intentions and abilities (Khamitov et al., 2024). When considering the development of consumer trust, factors that influence the perception of an organization’s reliability or integrity are particularly important (Weingarten & Goodman, 2021). When comparing these two factors, reliability and integrity, integrity-based antecedents have a greater impact on customer trust than reliability-based antecedents (Khamitov et al., 2024). While these are important elements for consumer trust, reputation is considered the strongest factor (Khamitov et al., 2024). Consumer trust and authenticity are closely linked, consumer trust in brands is influenced by authenticity, which can give companies a competitive advantage compared to other brands (Napoli et al., 2014; Safeer & Liu, 2023).

2.2 Transparency and credibility

Consumers often show skepticism towards companies' environmental claims, risking green purchases and weakening green markets (Schmuck et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2024). For this reason, transparency and credibility are seen as key factors in building consumer trust (Schmuck et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2024). It is especially important for sustainable brands to maintain transparency and consistency in their communication and actions (Huang & Guo, 2021). Consumers keep transparency as an important element when considering of a brand's authenticity (Huang & Guo, 2021). If consumers do not recognize transparency from a brand, they might think that the brand is trying to improve their sustainability image by greenwashing (Huang & Guo, 2021).

Transparency means that customers receive all the necessary information and at the same time are informed about what is being done, what the goals are and how environmental impact can still be improved (Kampman, 2021). Transparency is considered very important when companies are trying to avoid the possibility of greenwashing (Kampman, 2021). Credibility refers to the brand's ability and willingness to consistently deliver on its promises, it is a combination of reliability and experience (del Barrio-Garcia & Prados-Pena, 2019). When a company wants to improve their credibility in sustainability, eco-labels and green certifications are proven to be very efficient (Kampman, 2021). This is because consumers tend to trust these certifications because they are provided by high authorities, such as governments (Kampman, 2021).

2.3 Greenwashing

Greenwashing refers to the practice of misleading consumers about a company's environmental policy or the environmental benefits of a product or service (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Lungwitz & Sjöstrand, 2022). Companies are communicating more about their responsibility in relation to environmental challenges and certain actions they are taking to reduce them (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Lee & Raschke, 2023). Companies, non-governmental groups and research institutions can all be responsible of

greenwashing (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Lee & Raschke, 2023). It is important to recognize that greenwashing includes fraudulent communication, as well as selective communication, where certain claims are faked (Font et al., 2025). With selective communication, a company can manipulate certain consumers and mislead them (Font et al., 2025).

Greenwashing is increasingly common due to growing consumer concern about environmental issues (Pizzetti et al., 2021). This increases the pressure on companies to appear more responsible, especially in relation to the environment (Pizzetti et al., 2021). The increasing difficulty to discover greenwashing shows that it is not just superficial, but increasingly professional and difficult to detect (Pizzetti et al., 2021). Companies use subcontractors to cover up their own cases of greenwashing (Eriksson & Svensson, 2016; Kitsis & Chen, 2021), which increases greenwashing as a phenomenon, as it takes place over the borders of a single organization (Eriksson & Svensson, 2016; Kitsis & Chen, 2021). As consumers are looking more for 'green' products, this may be a reason for companies to engage in greenwashing to attract consumers (Pizzetti et al., 2021). For this reason, companies have a growing pressure to present themselves as environmentally conscious (Szabo & Webster, 2021). It is easier for companies to engage in false symbolic communication, like greenwashing than to change their activities (Ruiz-Blanco et al., 2022).

Perceived greenwashing refers to how consumers perceive or experience greenwashing (Szabo & Webster, 2021). The perception of greenwashing does not always say that a company is taking part in such practices but rather shows the way it is experienced (Szabo & Webster, 2021). Consumers are less satisfied when they perceive greenwashing. Consumers who believe that a company exaggerates its environmental claims, do not trust the company's communication (Font et al., 2025). If consumers feel that the company is over-informing them about its sustainable policies, they may see this as an attempt to mislead them. Lastly, perceived greenwashing arises from an over-communication (Font et al., 2025). Consumers perceive a distance from the brand or its values when they suspect greenwashing (Font et al., 2025).

Green brand attachment is an evolving concept in customer behavior (Baca & Reshidi, 2025). Green brand attachment favors an emotional connection between individuals and brands that show environmental responsibility and try hard to exceed expectations (Baca & Reshidi, 2025). Green brand attachment has become more important because consumers increasingly prioritize sustainability and therefore are more likely to support and purchase products that are environmentally friendly (Vo et al., 2025).

Green authenticity means that organizations environmental statements are accurate and credible (Wiederstein, 2024). When consumers find that a green company is genuine in its environmental activities, it promotes trust in the brand's products and services (Wiederstein, 2024). Green authenticity can be seen as the opposite of greenwashing, and it can help companies in getting consumer trust and build loyalty. (Chua et al., 2024).

3 RQ 2 What roles does authenticity play in creating consumers loyalty compared to other factors such as price, quality or convenience?

This chapter examines the role of authenticity in creating consumers loyalty. It also examines the other factors that effect on consumers loyalty and compare it with authenticity.

Authenticity plays a significant role in consumers loyalty (Kim et al., 2021). When a brand is authentic, it attracts consumers better than brands that are not showing authenticity (Kim et al., 2021). Authenticity is necessary when it comes to consumer satisfaction (Muskat et al., 2019). Authenticity is a more important indicator of consumer satisfaction than price fairness and service quality (Muskat et al., 2019). While pricing and profit can bring short-term benefits, they weaken a brand's authenticity and consumer loyalty (Fritz et al., 2017; Södergren, 2021). If a brand prioritizes profit maximization over its values and standards, it is perceived as fake, unoriginal and inauthentic (Fritz et al., 2017; Södergren, 2021).

Consumer loyalty is defined as a strong commitment to buy and prefer a product or a service again, regardless of situational considerations or marketing strategies that may potentially influence purchasing behavior (Oliver, 2014; Zeithaml et al., 2020). Consumer loyalty can have different characteristics depending on how it is viewed. Consumer loyalty can include strong and positive beliefs or attitudes towards a brand, which is defined as attitudinal loyalty (Kyllönen, 2024). Consumer loyalty can be referred to as behavioral loyalty when customers consistently purchase a particular brand without having a strong attitudinal commitment (Kyllönen, 2024). Situational loyalty represents a perspective on consumer loyalty that is characterized by being vulnerable to personal or external influences (Kyllönen, 2024). Consumer loyalty goes beyond recurring buying habits, a consumer may choose the same store for different reasons but not show loyalty as a customer (Asgarpour et al., 2013; Kyllönen 2024).

3.1 Comparison factors

When consumers buy a product or service, they consider how well the product or provider meets their personal needs (Wilkins et al., 2023). If authenticity is not considered, consumer purchasing behaviors is usually influenced more by quality and price than by other factors, such as reputation and trust (Wilkins et al., 2023).

3.1.1 Price

Price fairness influences consumers' perception of customer satisfaction when considering a service (Ahmed et al., 2023), because consumers perceive price as an evaluation criterion for the offered service (Ahmed et al., 2023). The fairness of a price is estimated by consumers by comparing it with competitors' prices (Ahmed et al., 2023). When it comes to consumer loyalty, price has an important influence (Kaura et al., 2015; Venkatakrishnan et al., 2023), if prices are perceived as reasonable, this leads to consumer loyalty and satisfaction (Venkatakrishnan et al., 2023). It has been found that it is highly advisable for companies to stay away from short-term price campaigns to ensure that the brand is authentic (Fritz et al., 2017; Södergren, 2021). This shows that price factor is important for both, consumers and companies (Fritz et al., 2017; Södergren, 2021).

3.1.2 Quality

The perception of authenticity is increased by natural motivation (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020), which improves the quality of products, even if it is viewed negatively (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020). The study shows that motivation influences the perception of products through perceived authenticity (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020). The authenticity of a brand has a major influence on the quality of brand relationships and therefore has a positive effect on customers' behavioral purposes and consumer loyalty (Fritz et al., 2017; Parris & Guzmán, 2023). The results show that considerations about authenticity are adaptive (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020), the authenticity of a brand leads consumers to expect higher standards from its products (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020).

Quality is also clear in service (Ahmed et al., 2023), service quality relates to several customer-oriented findings, including consumer loyalty, satisfaction, and buying habits (Miranda et al., 2018; Venkatakrisnan et al., 2023). Customer satisfaction is directly influenced by perceived service quality (Ahmed et al., 2023), the results of the study show that perceived service quality significantly influences consumer loyalty (Miranda et al., 2018; Venkatakrisnan et al., 2023). Consumer loyalty is influenced by customer satisfaction (Ahmed et al., 2023), consumers who experience high-quality service, are more likely to show loyalty to the provider and increase their purchases (Wilkins et al., 2023).

In a study by Safeer and Liu (2023), authenticity was compared with quality. Consumers are all the time searching more authenticity in brands and even consider it more important than quality (Safeer & Liu, 2023). It is important to notice that this may not apply to all brands but at least it applies to the brand choices of consumers for global brands (Safeer & Liu, 2023).

3.1.3 Convenience

Convenience is an important factor for consumers (see Table 2.) (Nevalainen, 2024). Consumers appreciate it when it is easy and convenient for them to buy a product or service (Nevalainen, 2024). This is especially true when the purchase is made online, but it plays a major role in any purchase (Kumar & Anjaly, 2017; Dhaigude & Mohan, 2023).

If a consumer perceives the service as convenient, this is usually an important factor in the perceived quality of the experienced service (Wilkins et al., 2023). This shows that convenience and quality are closely related. Convenience appears to consumers as an ease of use (Lehtonen, 2020). To make sure consumers are satisfied, they must be able to browse and purchase services easily and effortlessly (Lehtonen, 2020).

Factor	Key content	Impact on consumer loyalty	References
Authenticity	Authenticity is a more important factor for consumer satisfaction and loyalty than price and quality. It increases trust and protects against dissatisfaction. The pursuit of profit at the expense of authenticity reduces loyalty.	Very strong: Influences both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. Brand authenticity creates long-lasting loyalty.	(Kim et al., 2021; Muskat et al., 2019; Fritz et al., 2017; Safeer & Liu, 2023).
Price	A fair price influences satisfaction and loyalty. Reasonable prices increase loyalty. Exaggerated promotions can undermine authenticity.	Average: May increase loyalty, but the effect may be short-lived or superficial.	(Kaura et al., 2015; Ahmed et al., 2023; Fritz et al., 2017; Venkatakrisnan et al., 2023).
Quality	The quality of services and products has a direct impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Authenticity creates expectations of high quality.	Strong: Good quality increases loyalty, but the effect may remain weak without a foundation of authenticity.	(Ahmed et al., 2023; Wilkins et al., 2023; Fritz et al., 2017; Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020; Parris & Guzmán, 2023).
Convenience	Convenience, simplicity and flexibility of delivery or use are important to consumers. They support a positive user experience.	Average: Increases behavioral loyalty but does not always lead to deeper commitment.	(Kumar & Anjaly, 2017; Nevalainen, 2024; Lehtonen 2020; Dhaigude & Mohan, 2023).

Table 2: Authenticity, price, quality and convenience compared to the impact on consumer loyalty.

4 RQ 3: How does emotional connection to a brand mediate the relationship between authenticity in sustainable branding and brand loyalty?

This chapter dives into the emotional connection and how it impacts to a brand between authenticity in sustainable branding and brand loyalty.

Emotional connection goes beyond brand loyalty (Rodrigues & Pinto Borges, 2021). Emotional reactions, whether they are positive or negative, has an important role in the relationship between a consumer and a brand (Rodrigues & Pinto Borges, 2021). The basic idea is that negative emotions decrease the relationship between brand and consumer, while positive emotions increase the relationship (Rodrigues & Pinto Borges, 2021).

When consumers create an emotional connection to a brand, this can be considered as a commitment to the brand (Baca & Reshidi, 2025). An emotional connection makes the brand experience personal and remarkable for consumers and as a result promotes a long-term commitment between consumers (Tarkiainen, 2024).

Emotional brand attachment can be described as a great emotional connection to a brand (Vredeveld, 2018; Shimul, 2022), which has been shown to be a significant indicator of loyalty and purchase intentions (Vredeveld, 2018; Shimul, 2022). Emotional connection and emotional brand attachment are closely related, but they are different in certain ways (Vredeveld, 2018; Shimul, 2022). Emotional connection and emotional brand attachment differ in that emotional connections have an impact on emotional brand attachment (Zarantonello, 2016; Aziz & Rahman, 2022). An emotional connection to a brand increases the likelihood of buying from that brand (Baca & Reshidi, 2025), when consumers are deeply involved with a brand, they develop stronger emotional connections and increase brand loyalty (Vo et al., 2025). Brand associations are connected to emotional connection (Akturan, 2018; Santos et al., 2024), brand associations include perceived benefits, feelings, attitudes and experiences, that are stored in consumers' memories (Akturan, 2018; Santos et al., 2024). It does not matter if the

associations are positive or negative, everything is stored in consumers' minds, and they associate it with the brand (Akturan, 2018; Santos et al., 2024).

Authentic brands act as symbolic resources that help consumers find meaning in their lives and define their identity (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016; Shimul, 2022). These authentic brands benefit from competitive advantages when thinking about strong consumer-brand connections, brand loyalty and growth (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016; Shimul, 2022). The authenticity of a brand is positively related to the emotional brand attachment and to the likelihood that the consumer will choose the brand (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2016; Shimul, 2022).

Khandai et al., (2023) findings show that brand trust increases when a brand uses sustainable marketing practices. This in turn leads to a higher level of brand affect, which increases attitudinal brand loyalty and eventually brand loyalty that is based on behavior (Khandai et al., 2023).

4.1 Brand trust/loyalty

Brand trust means that consumers believe that a brand can deliver on its promises (Safeer & Liu, 2023). Brand trust and especially brand love is affected by the theory of emotion, which was created by Russel in 1980 (Khalid et al., 2024). The theory of emotion assumes that a brand's authenticity and popularity affects consumers, so that they experience strong emotions, and these strong emotions are known as brand love (Khalid et al., 2024). These emotions influence on consumers ways of expressing themselves and especially when a company is marketing about something that consumers care about, such as sustainability (Khalid et al., 2024). These emotions and ways of self-expression lead to brand loyalty (Khalid et al., 2024). When consumers think of a brand's features and the features are important for them, they will start to trust the brand more and when the trust increases, also their loyalties towards the brand strengthens (Safeer & Liu, 2023).

A study by Guèvremont and Grohmann (2018) found that consumers trust a brand more if they perceive it as authentic (Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2018; Papadopoulou et al., 2023). When a consumer perceives a brand as honest, safe and trustworthy, a sense of security is created, which leads to the development of trust, which in turn supports loyalty (Huang & Guo, 2021). The study by Tiep Le et al., (2023) shows that trust and loyalty are connected, with trust being an important foundation for loyalty. Consumers trust in a brand that encourages emotional connection, that can affect in attitudinal loyalty and willingness to purchase from that brand (Khandai et al., 2023).

When consumers perceive greenwashing from a brand, they can develop a negative attitude that affects their purchasing behavior and brand loyalty (Zaid et al., 2024). If consumers perceive that a brand is trying to affect on their behavior or decisions too much, their loyalty and love towards that brand can decrease (Zaid et al., 2024). Consequently, consumers look for more trustworthy brands and if they perceive that a brand is not being honest and rather tries to effect on their behavior too much, consumers can lose their interest and rather choose other brands that feel more trustworthy (Zaid et al., 2024).

4.1.1 Brand love

Brand love refers that a consumer has a strong emotional connection to a certain brand (Khalid et al., 2024). Brand love is created, when a consumer experiences that a brand suits them well and therefore, wants to use and recommend it also to others (Khalid et al., 2024). Emotional connection to a brand is formed when a consumer perceives a brand as authentic and commits to it (Rodrigues & Pinto Borges, 2021), these concepts together create brand love (Rodrigues & Pinto Borges 2021). When consumer experiences brand love, it increases their trust and loyalty towards a brand (Joshi & Garg, 2021). A strong psychological relationship with a brand means that consumers have a positive experience and attitude towards it (Khalid et al., 2024). Brand love is positively influenced by the popularity of brands, for example, when a particular brand is trending consumers are more likely to feel love towards it (Joshi & Garg, 2021). Sustainable branding

is likely to improve authenticity and influences on consumers' brand love (Joshi & Garg, 2021). Consumers can easily switch from one brand to another if there is no significant emotional connection (Karjaluoto et al., 2016; Johsi & Garg, 2021). Perceived brand authenticity (PBA) dimensions, heritage, quality commitment and sincerity have a positive influence on brand love (Safeer et al., 2023). These dimensions can support brand love and motivate customers towards more authentic brands (Napoli et al., 2014; Vander Schee et al., 2020).

Greenwashing decreases consumers purchase behavior, but it also harms brand love (Xiao et al., 2021). When consumers are uncertain about a brand, this can lead them to postpone their purchases on that brand, which impacts negatively on brand love and in the company's performance (Zaid et al., 2024).

4.2 Positive emotions

When comparing brand stories and basic brand facts, positive emotions that consumers perceive through brand stories effect on consumers decisions more than brand facts (Huang & Guo, 2021). Brand stories are perceived as more convincing, which is more appealing to consumers and strengthens trust in the brand (Tarkiainen, 2024). Brand stories have been found to reduce negative connections, suggesting that a brand with a compelling story is perceived as more appealing by consumers (Tarkiainen, 2024). Green messages influence consumers on an emotional level (Tarkiainen, 2024), for example, green consumers can feel positive emotions such as pride and satisfaction when using green brands (Huang & Guo, 2021). For this reason, a green brand story is an important branding strategy (Huang & Guo 2021). While green brands create positive emotions in consumers' minds, they can easily be manipulated about 'being green' (Akturan, 2018; Santos et al., 2024).

When brands are important for consumers in achieving their goals and have a strong connection to the self, consumers build an emotional connection to the brand (Park & MacInnis, 2018; Khamitov et al., 2020). Strong and positive emotions associated with

brands that impact on the consumer can also be motivating (Park & MacInnis, 2018; Khamitov et al., 2020). They can create brand attachment (Park et al., 2013; Shimul, 2022) and motivate repurchasing, but also create psychological emotional commitment, which itself is seen as a positive support towards a brand (Park & MacInnis, 2018; Khamitov et al., 2020).

4.3 Negative emotions

Consumers' negative emotions towards a brand have so far been mostly ignored and studies have only focused on positive emotions (Rodrigues & Pinto Borges, 2021). Negative emotions easily weaken consumers trust that a brand is authentic (Rodrigues & Pinto Borges, 2021). Negative emotions have a major impact on consumers avoiding a brand and that is why it is important to understand, how these emotional reactions influence on customers' brand relationships (Chowdhry, 2015; Aeron & Rahman, 2023).

Various studies have shown that negative information about a brand is more unforgettable and more likely to be shared when compared to positive information (Chowdhry, 2015; Aeron & Rahman, 2023). Negative emotions are more valuable because avoiding threats is more important for consumers than looking for pleasure or other benefits (Rodrigues & Pinto Borges, 2021).

The study shows that authenticity alone is not enough when creating brand loyalty. Emotional connection to a brand is a key factor in building loyalty between a consumer and a brand (Chowdhry, 2015; Tarkiainen, 2024).

5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications & Answers to Research Questions

There have been studies previously, that look over authenticity, but what many studies lack, is the breakdown of what different aspects of authenticity are most important especially when considering sustainable branding. This thesis answered to three research questions, which were, *what aspects of authenticity are most important in building consumer trust in sustainable brands, what roles does authenticity play in creating consumers loyalty in comparison to other factors such as price, quality or convenience and how does emotional connection to a brand mediate the relationship between authenticity in sustainable branding and brand loyalty.*

Sincerity, being one of the main key factors in perceived brand authenticity was found out to have a big impact on consumers' trust. This was because when a consumer considers the brand as sincere it helps the consumer to connect with the brand. Through this study, I was able to find that in sustainable brands, perceived brand authenticity has become an important factor, because it helps reducing consumer skepticism and because of it, truly sustainable brands can be separated from the ones who are using greenwashing. It was also found out that brands, who focus on quality, increases consumers trust with claims that are concrete and that can be proven.

5.2 Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, it is important for brands to keep consistency, when considering everything. It is necessary to understand consumer needs and keeping promises when thinking of customer orientation. The brands values must stay in line with the employees' values, because it strengthens the employee's engagement to the brand. When a crisis happens, authentic brands survive better, because consumers are more forgiving to them.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

The research gives a scratch on the surface of authenticity in sustainable branding and consumer trust because of time and length limitation. Even so the research summed up the main findings and offered a good literature review about the subject. The different aspects of authenticity and their impact on trust, especially with sustainable brands, has not been studied enough. Authenticity has rarely been compared to other factors that affect loyalty, such as price or quality. In sustainable brands, consumers priorities may change, and authenticity's impact compared to other factors must be studied more. Also, the emotional connection between authenticity and loyalty, particularly in sustainable branding, needs further research. Although it is known that authenticity increases emotional connection, emotional attachments exact impact on consumer loyalty is required. More research is also needed in considering negative emotions and their impact on experiencing authenticity. Consumers reactions to brand stories and their impact on purchasing behavior could be researched more and it could be useful to analyze the cross-cultural differences in the perception of authenticity and its impact on brand loyalty.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to study the importance of authenticity considering consumers trust, emotional connection and brand loyalty, particularly in sustainable branding. The research shows that authenticity is a wide concept that includes multiple aspects from honesty to consistency and customer orientation. Authenticity is not just a brands feature, but also a process that effects on consumers purchase behavior and brand choices. Consumers require the brand to show more transparency and stay by the claims that they say, because in the context of sustainability, those actions show consumers' authenticity and loyalty.

Emotional connection has a strong impact between authenticity and brand loyalty. Positive emotions, such as pride and satisfaction, strengthen the consumers loyalty, while negative emotions weaken them. To have consumers' long-term trust, an authentic brand builds trust and creates an emotional bond with the consumers. Although price, quality and convenience are important factors in consumers decisions, but in the context of sustainability, authenticity can have a bigger effect. Consumers prefer more authentic brands, because these brands help them to find their identity and a meaning in their life.

Because of time and length limitations, this research had some restrictions. The thesis focused on literature review and did not include empirical data, which can affect to the results. The different aspects of authenticity and how they influence on sustainable brands should be researched more, because it has not been searched extensively. There is also a need for research in brand stories and how they effect on consumers' decisions and how cultural differences impact on consumers perceptions of authenticity and brand loyalty.

In summary the answer to RQ1 is that the most important factors of authenticity in building consumers trust towards sustainable brands are the key factors of PBA. These factors are quality commitment, heritage and sincerity. Transparency was also found out to be an important element. The answer to RQ2 is that authenticity can be more important

than price, quality and convenience in building consumer trust. This is especially when consumers have a strong emotional connection with a brand. The answer to RQ3 is that emotional connection helps, when connecting authenticity and brand loyalty. Positive emotions strengthen the consumers relationship to a brand. These answers bring theoretical implications for marketing literature. Authenticity shows as an important factor in sustainable branding, because consumers search for meaningful and genuine experiences and are very careful with companies' ecological claims.

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