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Consumer evaluations on sustainable branding of international co-brands

Case Adidas x Marimekko

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ABSTRACT:

Companies are now seeking ways to differentiate themselves from the competitors through increasing the intangible assets of the company one of which the brand. Due to the rising importance of intangible assets, firms are now finding different ways of branding and as a result, new co-branding strategies have been evolved. Co-branding is a strategy in which two or more existing brands are combined to form a product or service. In the centrum of the branding evolution is sustainability as a differentiator. Sustainability refers to factors that are considered on environmental, social, and economic levels. The competitiveness of the market is also derived from the awareness of the consumers who are now focusing on making sustainable choices. Consumers are becoming more aware of their decisions and the impacts resulting from them, and therefore, companies now need to focus on branding themselves sustainable, as committing to environmental, social, and economic dimensions and communicating about them clearly for the consumers.

This thesis aims to increase the understanding of the factors that affect consumers' evaluations in terms of the sustainable brand of an international co-brand. As a part of this qualitative study, a case study was conducted for five different focus-groups through semi-structed interviews. For this thesis, a case co-brand Adidas x Marimekko was chosen in order to analyse the sustainable brand creation. The theoretical framework of this thesis is built on the existing theories in co-branding, sustainable branding, and the formation of consumer evaluations. The theoretical objective of this thesis is forming an understanding of the ways how international companies can build their sustainable brand by using co-branding as the strategy. Another objective is to clarify the process of how international consumers evaluate sustainable brands and analyse the essential factors affecting them.

The factors affecting consumer evaluations in terms of the sustainable brand of an international co-brand include attitudes towards both parent brands, spillover effects, perceived brand and product fit, country-of-origin effect as well as the sustainable attributes and the communication of them. Furthermore, the results showed that the brand communication must be trustworthy as especially in fashion industry, greenwashing is an issue.

KEYWORDS: Co-branding, sustainable branding, consumer evaluations, branding, brand

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TIIVISTELMÄ:

Yritykset tavoittelevat uusia tapoja erottautua kilpailijoistaan kasvattamalla aineetonta omaisuuttaan, joista yhtenä merkittävimpänä voidaan luokitella brändi. Aineettoman omaisuuden merkityksen kasvu saa yritykset kehittämään uusia tapoja brändätä itsensä, ja tämän seurauksena on syntynyt uudenlaisia brändäysstrategioita, kuten yhteisbrändäys. Yhteisbrändäys on strategia, jossa kaksi tai useampaa brändiä luovat yhdessä tuotteen tai palvelun. Brändäyksen muutoksen keskiössä on myös vastuullisuus. Vastuullisuus tarkoittaa ekologisen, sosiaalisen ja taloudellisen kestävyyden huomioonottamista. Markkinoiden kilpailukyky on peräisin myös kuluttajien kasvavasta tietoisuudesta liittyen vastuullisiin valintoihin. Kuluttajat ovat yhä tietoisempia valinnoistaan sekä niiden vaikutuksista, ja sen takia yritysten tulee nyt keskittyä brändäämään itsensä vastuullisina, joka mahdollistetaan sitoutumalla ekologiseen, sosiaaliseen sekä taloudelliseen kestävyyteen.

Tämän tutkielman tavoitteena on lisätä ymmärrystä niistä tekijöistä, jotka vaikuttavat kuluttajien näkemyksiin vastuullisesta brändistä, joka rakennetaan kansainvälisten yhteisbrändien avulla. Osana laadullista tutkimusta, viisi puolistrukturoitua ryhmähaastattelua pidettiin osana case-tutkimusta. Tässä tutkielmassa analysoidaan case-yhteisbrändiä, Adidas x Marimekko -mallistoa, jonka avulla tutkitaan vastuullisen brändin rakentamista. Tutkielman teoreettinen viitekehys rakentui olemassa olevan teorian perusteella yhteisbrändäyksen, vastuullisen brändäyksen sekä kuluttajakokemusten kirjallisuudesta. Tämän tutkielman teoreettisena tavoitteena on muodostaa ymmärrys niistä tavoista, joilla kansainväliset yritykset voivat rakentaa vastuullisen brändin käyttämällä yhteisbrändäystä strategianaan. Lisäksi toisena tavoitteena on selkeyttää sitä prosessia, miten kansainväliset kuluttajat muodostavat brändikokemuksiaan sekä analysoida tekijöitä, jotka vaikuttavat tähän kokemukseen.

Kuluttajakokemuksiin vastuullisen brändin rakentumiseen kansainvälisten yhteisbrändien avulla vaikuttavat brändiasenteet kumpaakin kumppanibrändejä kohtaan, brändien heijastusvaikutukset, kuluttajien kokema brändien välinen yhteensopivuus, brändien tuotekategorioiden välinen yhteensopivuus, brändin alkuperämaa sekä vastuulliset ominaisuudet sekä niistä viestintä. Tulokset lisäksi osoittavat, että brändiviestinnän tulee olla luotettavaa, sillä viherpesu on erityisesti vaatealalla koettu ongelma.

AVAINSANAT: Yhteisbrändäys, vastuullinen brändäys, kuluttajakokemus, brändäys, brändi

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1 Introduction

The first chapter will provide an insight into the topic. First, general information is provided, and the research problem is introduced. After this, the research objectives and the research question of this thesis are given. The intended contributions, key concepts and the structure of the thesis are also given in the end of the chapter.

1.1 Background

Today's international markets are highly competitive making it harder for companies to successfully introduce new products and services for consumers. Companies are thus now seeking ways to differentiate themselves from the competitors through increasing the intangible assets of the company one of which the brand. Brand is the visible feature that represents the performance, values, and outcomes that the organization wants consumers to perceive (Davis, 2017, p. 12). Due to the rising importance of intangible assets, firms are now finding different ways of branding and as a result, new co-branding strategies have been evolved. Co-branding (cooperative branding) is a strategy in which two or more existing brands are combined to form a product or service (Leuthesser et al., 2002). In the centrum of the branding evolution is sustainability as a differentiator. The competitiveness of the market is also derived from the awareness of the consumers who are now focusing on making sustainable choices through supporting companies that commit to social, environmental, and economic dimensions on their operations (Loh & Tan, 2020; Winit et al., 2023). Consumers are becoming more and more aware of their decisions and the impacts resulting from them and therefore, companies now need to focus on branding themselves as sustainable, thus committing to these dimensions and communicating about them clearly for the consumers (Mahmood & Bashir, 2020; Majer et al., 2022).

Companies need to now increase the visibility of the sustainable aspects of the brand, and this can be accomplished by an enhanced brand image and building desired brand

associations thus focusing on the sustainable branding. Focusing on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is these days rather a demand of the market instead of a way to build competitive advantage to (Carrero & Valor, 2012, p. 629). CSR covers organizational responsibilities from social, environmental, and ethical dimensions and consumers are now more demanding regarding commitments that deal with CSR (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009, p. 328). Through intangible assets of the company, consumers are able to perceive a certain image of the company (Brady, 2002, p. 280) and therefore, brands can be an effective tool in building the sustainable brands and raising awareness about them.

This thesis focuses on defining consumer evaluations on sustainable branding through international co-brands. As a result of the high competition, companies are now seeking to explore new branding strategies in order to distinguish themselves from the competitors and this has occurred in the emergence of new branding strategies such as co-branding. The target in the companies that are forming the co-brand is to result in positive effects for both (Helmig et al., 2008, p. 360), thus the co-operation should be something that benefits both brands. The benefits of successful co-branding are known as cost reductions of new market entries and the acceleration of the adoption of the new product or the two brands that are involved. Co-branding alliances also enable other benefits such as gaining access to new target markets, global brand creation, increases in sales as well as building brand equity (Pinello et al., 2021, p. 585).

Under further examination in this thesis is a case co-brand Adidas x Marimekko. Marimekko is a Finnish lifestyle-design company Marimekko which has made various co-branding collections with different brands such as the sportwear brand Adidas, clothing brand UNIQLO and a Finnish airline Finnair. Marimekko's product portfolio consists of clothing, accessories, and interior items (Marimekko Oyj, n.d.). Adidas is a German athletic apparel and sport equipment producer that operates in global markets as a mass producer (Adidas Group, n.d.).

1.2 Research gap

Despite of the previous research addressed to co-branding at large extent (Table 1) and increasing research about sustainable branding to some extent (Table 2), there remains a research gap of understanding what affects the way how consumers evaluate sustainable brands that are formed through international co-branding arrangements. The connection between sustainable brands and co-brands is still lacking research. Thus, also the area of consumer evaluations lacks further examination in terms of how consumers from different cultures evaluate co-brands and the sustainability of them and what role do spillover effects play in terms of sustainability in international co-brands.

Blackett & Russel (2000, p. 161-170) have investigated the shared value creation in the co-branding arrangements and categorized the different types of co-branding according to them. Helmig et al. (2008) have researched a structured overview on the co-branding strategies. The concept of co-branding through the decades has resulted in a fragmented definition, and in order to prevent this, meta-analyses have been introduced about the negative and positive outcomes of the co-branding arrangements as well as about the motivations and differences in the co-branding alliances (Paydas Turan, 2021; Pinello et al., 2022).

The current state of the sustainability literature focuses on the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and brand equity (Prasad & Kumar, 2022). One of the most well-known theories in sustainability context is the Triple Bottom Line theory which focuses on sustainability performance in social, environmental, and economic dimensions (Elkington, 1998). The dependency between sustainability branding and building competitive advantage has been examined (Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014). Despite sustainability being increasingly important element, the connection between sustainability and branding has been left without further examination. There is not a single right sustainability branding model, therefore it still lacks some research.

This provides an exciting opportunity to investigate the connection between sustainable branding through international co-brands and how do consumers perceive them in terms of the sustainability. There remains a gap in understanding how consumers see the brand in terms of its sustainability through co-brands operating in international markets, and how they see the compatibility between the brands in the context of building a sustainable brand. Also, the role of country-of-origin in this context remains under further examination.

1.3 Research question and objectives of the study

The main purpose of the study is to analyse the factors that affect consumer evaluations of sustainable brands that are formed through international co-brands. The theories under analyse of this thesis are formed based on the literature review of topics in co-branding, sustainable branding and consumer evaluation formations.

Research question/s: Given the purpose of this thesis, the research question that this thesis aims to answer is the following question:

> "Which factors affect consumers' evaluations in terms of the sustainable brand of an international co-brand?"

This thesis also aims to contribute to the two chosen objectives of this study. Through these two research objectives, the reader will gain a comprehensive understanding of the core ideas of how sustainable brands are formed and what affects the evaluations. **Research objectives** of this thesis are:

- **Objective 1**: To define the ways how international companies can build their sustainable brand by using co-branding as the strategy.
- **Objective 2**: Clarify the process of how international consumers evaluate international sustainable brands by analysing the factors that affect them.

Intended contributions: This study targets to clarify the topic of how international companies can build their sustainable brand by using co-branding as the strategy. This study also aims to build a better dependency between the topics and how could companies benefit from utilizing the co-branding theory in building the sustainable brand. As this topic has been left without deeper attention, this study aims to provide a comprehensive insight on how to combine the existing theories of co-branding into sustainable branding and how do international consumers see the sustainable brand.

1.4 Focus of the study

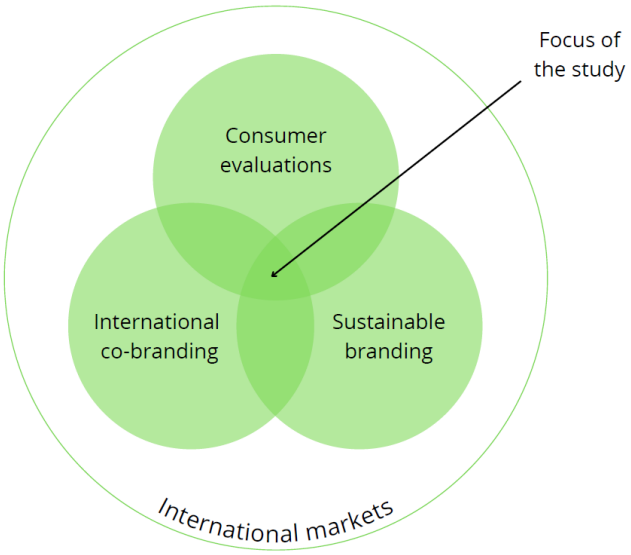

Figure 1: Focus of the study.

The focus of this study is to understand how consumer evaluate international sustainable brands of international co-brands. Figure 1 demonstrates how the essential topics are positioned in this thesis. Figure 1 also highlights the importance of the research gap in the literature of these topics.

1.5 Definitions

Key definitions: The key definitions of this thesis are brand, branding, co-branding, and sustainable branding. To form a clear vision of the topic of this thesis, the author will present the definitions of the key concepts next:

Brand is described as “any distinctive feature like a name, term, design, or symbol that identifies goods or services” (American Marketing Association, n.d.). Supporting this definition, Flemming & Christensen (2003, p. 12) defined a brand as something that differentiates the company from its competitors with these distinctive features. Davis (2017, p. 12) interprets brand as a whole “personality” of the company, thus presenting the whole image of the company for its target audience. Brands are intangible assets of the company that can produce competitive advantage (Washburn et al., 2000, p. 593).

Branding is defined as the process of building a brand and positioning the company’s position in the market (Davis, 2017, p. 12). The process requires knowledge of the markets, businesses, the competitors, and understanding of the company’s vision and the desired direction where it will aim. Branding is also defined as the process of producing value by providing attractive and unified offer and customer experience that will please customers that they will return (Simmons, 2007, p. 545). Simmons also states that branding is a strategy for the company to build a differentiated image of the company and building relationships with the customers.

Co-branding is a strategy for two or more brands forming a joint offer by combining their synergies to form associations about a formed product or a service resulting in a new co-brand or also referred as brand alliance (Pinello et al. 2021, p. 585). Co-branding enables the reputation and the competencies of the existing brand being transformed to the new formed co-brand though the associated value (Yu et al. 2021, p. 342). The difference between a co-brand and a new brand or joint venture is that the net value creation is too small for forming a new brand or joining a venture (Blackett & Russel, 2000, p. 163).

Sustainable branding is the process of building a brand that integrates commitment of environmental, social, and economic issues into the company's operations, thus creating sustainability associations to the company (Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014, p. 9). Sustainability should be achieved with a strong brand and the company reputation (Winit et al., 2023, p. 1).

1.6 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured as it follows: In section 2 the theoretical background of existing literature of consumer evaluations, co-branding and sustainable branding are introduced through a comprehensive literature review. The theory of sustainability and how can firms build their sustainable brand is intertwined with the existing theory of how companies can utilize co-branding as a strategy. The theoretical framework of this thesis is also introduced in the chapter. In section 3, the research design is introduced, including case co-brand introduction, the research strategy, and data collection methods of the semi-structured focus-group interviews. The chosen analysis, qualitative content analysis and the trustworthiness of the study are also introduced in the chapter. In chapter 4, interviews are described, and the findings of the case interviews are connected to the qualitative content analysis. Chapter 5 contains the essential findings derived from the qualitative analysis based on the collected data, and the revised theoretical framework is introduced. Lastly, chapter 6 concludes the thesis by introducing theoretical contribution, managerial implications as well as limitations and propositions for future research.

2 Consumer evaluations in terms of sustainability in co-brands

In this section, the relevant literature and studies conducted on theories of co-branding, consumer evaluations as well as sustainable branding are presented in order to receive a comprehensive idea of the current state of the research. It is essential to understand the whole brand experience and how are consumer evaluations formed, especially when evaluating the sustainability of an international brand.

2.1 International co-brands and consumer evaluations

Co-branding is a strategy for forming a longer-term brand alliance between two or more brands that target to form positive consumer associations (Washburn et al., 2000, p. 591). Through the co-operation between two brands, they receive an access to new resources, thus a new product or service is introduced to the markets by using resources that could not be leveraged if only one brand operated on its own (Childs & Jin, 2020; Bengtsson & Servais, 2005; Helmig et al, 2008). In the centrum of building co-brands is the brand orientation that guides the direction to which the brand identity is targeted. International co-brands are formed between partner brands that are located to different countries (Wilkins et al, 2018, p. 35). Kusi et al. (2022, p. 2) suggest that international brand orientation refers to building the brand identity, thus including the processes that aim to build, develop, and preserve the brand identity through interaction with customers. This will result in competitive advantage that is generated through international markets. Steenkamp (2017, p. 3) also states that brands that operate in the global markets have the same marketing mix and brand attributes in global markets resulting in same positioning internationally.

According to Paydas Turan (2021, p. 911), the associated values of the alliance brands as well as their essential brand characteristics are transferred to the new formed co-brand. Chang (2009, p. 950) states that the core ideology behind co-branding is that the relationship between the companies is commercially beneficial for both brands. The

coordinated promotional efforts aim to acquire corporate endorsements that will strengthen the market positions of one or more brands involved in the co-operation (Washburn et al., 2000, p. 592).

Helmig et al. (2008, p. 360) describe co-branding with following four different categories that differentiate co-branding from other brand leverage strategies. The core idea of leveraging a brand is focusing on its existing equity rather than building new brand equity (Zickermann, 2015, p. 16). According to Helmig et al. (2008, p. 360), first category includes the need of co-operating brands to stay independent during the whole co-operation. Second, the purpose of the co-branding strategy should be based on a purpose. Third, the buyers should be able to see the co-operation between the brands. Lastly, one product needs to be combined with the two or more brands involved into the alliance.

There are various of reasons behind firms deciding to form co-branding alliances. Pinello et al. (2020, p. 596) suggest that fundamental element in co-brands is the spillover effect through which the collaborating brands target to improve the consumer perceptions that they transfer from one brand to another. Co-branding, especially international co-brands, offer advantages when it comes to new market entry; there is a limited risk of entering a new market as the companies can benefit from the brand name recognition of the other, they gain access to new resources of the other company as well as receive market exposure which can result also in reduced promotion expenses (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Childs & Jin, 2020; Washburn et al., 2000). International co-branding also reduces the threat derived from the competitors of the international markets (Abratt & Motlana, 2002, p. 44).

The benefits also refer to forming brand equity (Samuelsen & Olsen, 2012, p. 188). Brand equity is defined as the “set of brand assets and liabilities that add or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers” (Aaker, D.A., 1991). These value exchanges between customers and the brands in international markets are illustrated in Figure 2 (Besharat & Langan, 2013, p. 120). Kalafatis et al. (2012,

p. 624) have stated that “constituent brands’ awareness, quality and brand equity” are the most essential factors for the co-brands to be successful. The product fit and brand fit between the companies are examined to be the most important elements in successful co-brands.

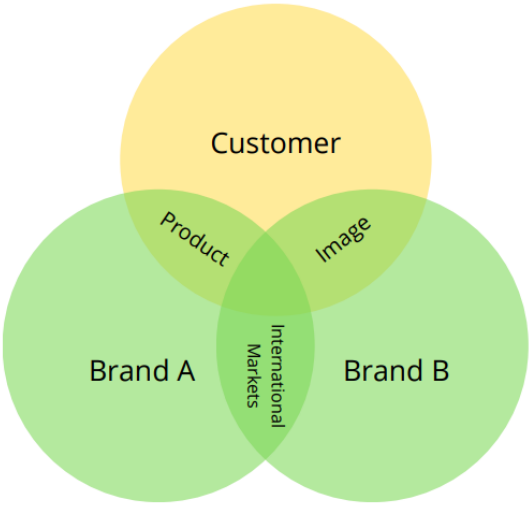

Figure 2: Value exchange between the co-brand and customer (Besharat & Langan, 2013, p. 120).

Besharat & Langan (2013, p. 120) thus state that in international co-brands, both parent brands will get access to resources of the other such as the international market in which the other brand operates (Figure 2). The customer in turn receives the co-branded product which is evaluated based on the attitudes towards the individual brands, brand A and brand B that form the co-brand together. This will result in a specific brand image of the brands.

Abratt & Motlana (2002, p. 44) recognize capitalizing the brand value as one of the main reasons why companies choose co-branding as their strategy. This refers to the assimilation of the two brands as well as the changing associations of the brands that result from one brand affecting the perceptions of another brand. This allows consumers to perceive brands differently even if they would have already certain brand image and thus may significantly affect the current image. Furthermore, Levin (2002, p. 148) states that the

assimilation is particularly strong when the brands are linked through a dual brand alliance.

Co-branding has been researched during decades, but most research focus on the brand equity formation and clarifying the concept of co-branding. Table 1 illustrates the existing state of the research on co-branding. Theories on co-branding have remained similar many years but have also gained different perspectives. The main aim of this study is to find out how consumers evaluate the sustainability in international co-brands which is a topic that has remained without further attention.

Table 1. Existing research on co-branding.

Main focus of the study	**Main findings of the study**	**Authors**	**Year**
Consumer evaluations toward brand extensions.	Product fit affects the attitudes, product attributes can positively affect negative associations.	Aaker & Keller	1990
The effectiveness of a composite brand in brand extensions.	Favourable attitudes towards one brand enhance the perceptions of the composite brand extension.	Park et al.	1996
Spillover effects	Spillover effects play a key role, partner brands might be affected different ways and attitudes, perceived product and brand fit play a crucial role.	Simonin, B. L. & Ruth, J. A.	1998
Effects on brand equity deriving from co-branding.	Co-branding is an effective for both alliance brands and the level of brand equity does not affect consumer evaluations.	Washburn et al.	2000
Co-branding as a strategy for internationalising brands.	Co-branding is an effective strategy for global brands introducing a new product.	Abratt & Motlana	2002
Co-branding definition and differentiation from other brand extensions.	Successful co-branding occurs when both brands add value to a partnership.	Leuthesser et al.	2003
Cooperative brand alliances and consumer evaluations.	Parent brand attitudes impact on co-branded evaluations.	Dickinson, S. J., & Heath, T.	2008
Perceived fit in co-branding alliances.	Co-brand will achieve positive outcomes if the degrees of fit are perceived high.	Thompson, K. & Strutton, D.	2012
Defining the concept of co-branding.	The benefits and risks derived from co-brands, how associations are formed and how are desired and undesired evaluations formed.	Besharat, A. & Langan, R	2013

2.1.1 Formation of consumer evaluations

The experiences with specific brands affect the overall evaluation of consumers. Brand experience is a process that includes the personal experience of a consumer that activates the brand-related stimuli that resonate with different elements of the brand, such as external appearance including packaging, marketing activities, communications and distinctive elements as brand design, logo, or name (Brakus et al., 2009). The brand experience will affect the consumer evaluations towards the brand.

It is essential that companies achieve the desired consumer evaluations towards a brand and therefore, it is important to focus on investigating how consumers form their evaluations about a brand and the company's products and services. Brand equity is affected by the brand reputation that is formed in the minds of consumers (Mahmood & Bashir, 2020). Mahmood & Bashir (2020) also believe that brands need to be consistent and logical in order for consumers to perceive the co-brand effectively. Therefore, the two co-operating brands need to have a specific connection between the brand fit e.g., in terms of their brand images, product categories, background or values that consumers can understand the connection behind formation of the co-brand.

The factors that affect consumer evaluations in international co-brands are brand attitudes, perceived fit between the brands, and the spillover effects (Dickinson & Barker, 2006, p. 78-81). In order for a co-brand to be successful, it is essential that consumers have positive attitudes towards both brands in the alliance. An attitude reflects the evaluations, inclinations, and feelings of a certain object (Parment et al., 2016, p. 140). Supporting this, Faircloth et al. (2015, p. 64) present that attitudes are formed as a result of evaluating and considering information from different options.

Parmet et al. (2016, p. 140) also highlight that it is difficult for a consumer to change attitudes as they are rather complex and may need adjustments regarding attitudes towards other objects. According to the attitude theory, it is likely that attitudes reflect the evaluations of a consumer, and these evaluations affect the consumer behaviour

(Bartsch et al., 2016, p. 3630). Attitudes function as filters that affect the way how an individual consumer perceives a brand (Faircloth et al. (2015, p. 64). If a consumer has positive attitudes towards a brand, the evaluations are likely to be positive, thus behaviour is likely to be positive as well.

Shimp et al. (1991) have researched the process how evaluations are formed. According to them, consumer evaluations are formed by cognitive associative learning according to which, existing associations on separate items are linked with evaluations that are based on knowledge and feelings towards a specific brand. This is especially essential with co-brands, as consumers evaluate them through conscious and unconscious perceptions that are formed by cognitive associative learning.

According to Customer-Based Brand Equity model (CBBE) developed by Keller (1993), that describes the brand perception creation in consumers' minds. Brand awareness refers to the extent of which consumers can identify a certain brand among others (Keller, 1993, p. 3). As demonstrated by Keller, brand awareness consists of two components; brand recognition, which refers to consumers ability to identify a certain brand based only on visual cues, and brand recall, which refers to consumers' capacity to remember a specific brand based on a particular category. Brand image, a part of CBBE, is based on the overall perceptions that are formed through the brand associations. Keller (1993, p. 3) highlights that the perceptions are based on a memory about a certain brand. Brand associations in turn are different from brand image in terms of "favourability, strength and uniqueness" and associations can be categorized as attributes (product-related and non-product-related attributes) and benefits (functional, experimental and symbolic benefits). Consumers are thus likely to remember a certain element of the brand, for example a product-related attribute which will form a certain image of the brand. For example, consumers might associate Marimekko's distinctive fabric patterns and form an image of a unique brand or Apple's design choices forming an image of innovativeness or user-friendliness.

The perceived fit also plays a crucial role in the success of the co-brand. The perceived fit relates to the extent of how similar or matching do consumers see the collaborating brands and the suitability of their product portfolios, thus the two essential factors in international co-brands are the brand fit and product fit between the brands (Thompson & Strutton, 2012, p. 15). The cognitive associative learning theory suggests that in co-brands, perceptions of a specific, strong brand are linked to the other brands' assumptions (Besharat, 2010; Shimp et al., 1991). The higher the brand fit is, the more successful the co-brand is likely to be (Helmig et al., 2008, p. 367). Consumers form these perceptions in their memory; thus, they are based on the earlier associations towards the brands (Simonin & Ruth, 1998, p. 33).

Also, product fit between the parent brands plays a significant role in the success of the co-brands. This fit describes the compatibility between the products of the brands as how well do consumers perceive they match (Park et al., 1996; Simonin & Ruth, 1998). The compatibility can also refer to the similarity in terms of the needs, components, features, manufacturing, and usage context (Smith & Park, 1992, p, 299). With brand leverage strategies, the brand is extended with a new product, and the compatibility of the new product is evaluated based on the existing attitudes towards the current products. The fit should be high, as consumers need to understand the relationship between the brands in order the co-brand to be successful (Park et al., 1996, p. 455). If consumers have positive attitudes towards the parent brands' products, these positive attitudes are likely to transfer onto the new co-branded product as well.

Park et al. (1996, p. 455) also highlight that the complementarity between the brands is an essential element to consider in the partner selection. The brands will harmonize each other if they share common attributes that seem relevant for consumers, or if attributes that are not important for one brand are important for the other brand or in a situation in which the attributes are important to one brand and the attribute has a higher performance compared to the brand that the attribute is not important. Kalafatis et al. (2012, p. 624) propose that a good fit between the brands occurs when the

attribute salience and performance levels are complementary. The collaboration between the brands should seem logical, consistent, or relevant for the consumers to trust the co-branded products.

Helmig et al. (2008, p. 365) emphasize the significance of brand alignment. According to them, the degree of congruity between the brands affects the evaluation. In other words, how well the brands match will impact the way how consumers perceive them. Similarly, Walchli (2007, p. 951) discovered partnerships between brands with moderate incongruity can result in better outcomes compared to those with either congruity or significant incongruity.

2.1.2 Spillover effects

Consumers tend to evaluate brands constantly in their minds in the daily life. When a new co-brand has been established, consumers will form perceptions and attitudes towards it based on the earlier perceptions of each partner brand. In the centrum of the success of the co-brand are spillover effects that refer to the change in associations of one entity due to the formed evaluations of another entity (Raufeisen et al., 2019, p. 249). In other words, the attitudes towards the co-brand affect the overall attitudes and evaluations of the parent brands. Thus, consumers form attitudes towards the co-brand that can also modify the image of each brand that forms the co-brand (Ma et al., 2018, p. 25).

Helmig et al. (2008, p. 367) suggest that consumers form weaker attitudes related to the more unknown brand in the co-brand compared to the more familiar brand. However, weaker brands benefit more from the spillover effects as they tend to be stronger than for familiar brands. Helmig et al. also present that spillover effects will be stronger or positive in co-brands in which: attitudes towards the product are positive, quality of the product is high, shared information in terms of the product does not imply negative

associations and if the products are similar to the product categories of the brands that form the co-brand.

2.1.3 Cultural theories in consumer evaluations

As international co-brands are formed from brands that operate in different countries, consumers perceive them differently between the countries. The home country of a consumer also impacts the purchasing intensions. Ho et al. (2019) present that consumers from different countries perceive and evaluate advertising, the product itself and information available in the market in differing ways. The varying ways to react are impacted by cultural differences, values and attitudes that vary between the cultures.

Culture itself is rather a multidimensional concept. Culture can be described as a set of standards that are common for the members within the culture, and these standards guide individual's perceiving, evaluating, interacting, and acting (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020, p. 41). According to Shavitt & Barnes, 2020, p. 41), culture is a psychological process; it that occurs in the minds of consumers. They also claim that the behaviour of an individual can be impacted through culturally connected conceptions that are formed in memory.

One of the most well-known frameworks, The Hofstede model, describes the cultural differences in a global context, and categorizes the differences into five different stages: 1) power distance, 2) individualism vs collectivism, 3) masculinity vs femininity, 4) uncertainty avoidance, and 5) long- vs short-term orientation (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010; Krueger & Nandan, 2008). According to psychological research, culture plays an important role in the way how consumers perceive brands, evaluate different options, and make purchasing decisions (Crotts & Erdmann, 2000, p. 410).

The first stage, power distance, refers to socially hierarchical societies and to the extent to which power is being distributed unequally orientation (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010,

p. 88). According to de Mooij & Hofstede (2010, p. 88), in the branding context, global brands need to serve the purpose of social status. Individuals need to be able to show the social status that others can observe it and respect it. Filieri & Mariani (2021, p. 1271) introduce consumers from high power distance as having higher expectations and more demanding standards which results in more critical consumer evaluations.

The second stage, individual vs collectivism, refers to the extent to which people see themselves as individuals (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010, p. 88-89). According to de Mooij & Hofstede (2010, p. 88-89), collectivist cultures see relationships and building trust essential elements and contrary to this, individualistic cultures do not highlight it. They also suggest that marketing activities, especially advertising, plays a crucial role and it is important whether the target of advertising is being persuasive or creating trust and relationships. Shavitt & Barnes (2020, p. 41) define consumers in individualistic cultures as prioritizing their personal satisfaction over others. This may alter the way how consumers perceive brands and how they associate them.

The third stage, masculinity vs femininity, includes the extent to which people appreciate achievements and performance orientation (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010, p. 89). In masculine cultures, status brands play a crucial role as achievement needs to be showed for others. On the contrary, feminine cultures value quality of life and the common goodness deriving from caring for others (Filieri & Mariani, 2021, p. 1272). Taking this into account, sustainability can be one factor appealing more for consumers from feminine cultures.

Fourth level of the model, uncertainty avoidance, is a definition for the extent to which people feel worried by uncertainty and how much of uncertainty they are prepared to feel (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010, p. 89). Cultures with low uncertainty avoidance can be seen more innovative and welcoming to change. Filieri & Mariani (2021, p. 1273) propose that consumers from high uncertainty avoidance spend more time on seeking information and comparing options before making purchase decisions. Therefore, it can

be stated that they value detailed information that companies provide them and evaluate them before making the final purchase decision.

Fifth and last level, long- vs short-term orientation, describes the level of whether people are future-oriented or historic and short-term oriented (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010, p. 89). According to Filieri & Mariani (2021, p. 1273), individuals from cultures with long-term orientation tend to value the spillover effect derived from other consumers. Like consumers from cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, consumers in cultures with long-term orientation tend to take more time on judging the offer before making purchase choice as they are weighting the possible future benefits resulting from the choice.

2.1.4 Country-of-origin effect

Another significant theory explaining the attitudes that vary by the country consumers are from, is the country-of-origin effect (COO). Witek-Hajduk & Grudecka (2023, p. 47) present that COO is the psychological effect according to which, the associations of a specific country affect attitudes, perceptions and purchasing decisions of consumers. According to them, it has been noted to have a connection between the preferred COO and an increased readiness to pay premium prices from products that are branded as the country-of-origin. COO has an effect to consumers evaluations as it affects the way how consumers see the products and their quality, how high they value the brand equity and whether they will purchase the products or not (Witek-Hajduk & Grudecka, 2023, p. 47). This also supports the core idea of the signaling theory.

Roth & Romeo (1992, p. 480) describe country-of-origin as how consumers view products from a specific country, and these impressions are affected by the attitudes about the production of the specific country and how they market it and with which ways. The impact of COO reaches to the dimensions of products including special types and classes of products, brands, manufacturing, as well as the image of developed and emerging countries (Prendergast et al., 2010, p. 181).

Koubaa (2008, p. 140-141) suggests that brand image perceptions are formed by an umbrella brand-image. Umbrella brand-image refers to a set of product features and the country-of-origin image from which the brand originates or where its products are manufactures. Brand image perceptions are covered by the umbrella brand-image as they are early perceptions of the overall brand image. Koubaa (2008, p. 141) further notes that the image is formed through the associations and evaluation deriving from the COO regarding products that is influenced by the brand's own and the country's reputation. Therefore, for example an association regarding Finnish products that are produced in Finland may positively signal about the product quality and responsible commitment regarding the production.

2.1.5 Signaling theory

One specific approach in analysing the connections between individual signal evaluations and signal evaluation has emerged. The *Signaling Theory* describes the process of signal perceptions that derive from brand attributes that affect the consumer behaviour (Pinello et al., 2022, p. 591). A brand functions as a tool to communicate about the product attributes and guarantee about the quality, as credibility is the most essential element of defining consumer-based equity (Erdem & Swait, 1998, p. 131). Erdem & Swait (2004, p. 192) present that credibility represents two main elements: trustworthiness and expertise. Rao et al. (1999, p. 259) claim that a *signal* is based on the given information by the company in situations in which they are difficult to be observed.

Signaling theory especially refers to reducing the asymmetry between the firm and the consumer, which will result in desired outcomes in the purchasing behaviour of the consumers (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Decker & Baade, 2016). Information asymmetry causes a situation in which different parties have different information that will affect the decision-making, for example companies know more about the product than the consumers (Chen & Lien, 2018; Erdem & Swait, 2004). Chen & Lien (2018, p. 997) explain that

consumers usually only have the amount of information as the companies will provide for them and their expectations rely on the attributes that are given from the company. By expressing relevant information about the brand through marketing activities, thus reducing the asymmetry in information, companies can positively affect the decision-making process of the consumers and thus receive desired consumer perceptions.

According to Decker & Baade (2016, p. 651), co-branding alliances are associated with signals of innovation, product quality and credibility. They also suggest that the signals that consumers form are perceptions of the brands and their corporate characteristics, which will be further evolved into brand associations. These signals are relevant in co-branding alliances, as consumers are already aware of the two parties forming the alliance, and the formed associations are used to evaluate the whole value of the alliance that will affect the brand attitudes and purchase intentions. In other words, consumers are already aware of the brands and product attributes, and therefore, they already have a specific vision about the new co-brand without having further experience or knowledge about the product or service.

According to Signaling theory, the alliance between two brands provides a greater guarantee about the product quality than the single brand would do on its own and these assumptions will lead to higher product evaluations and thus, premium pricing (Chen & Lien, 2018; Helmig et al., 2008). In the alliance, the other brand is able to signal the quality of the second brand that it could not be able to signal on its own and therefore the signals play a crucial role (Rao et al., 1999, p. 261). Chen & Lien (2018, p. 997) state that Signaling theory applied into co-branding context shows that costs are derived from the resources spent on the direct investments of co-branded products that aim to obtain the essential attributes of both parties in the co-branding arrangement. Park et al. (1996, p. 454) suggest that if there are two brands involved instead one operating on its own, they should be able to provide better guarantee about the product quality. Signals play a crucial role with co-branded products as consumers cannot be guaranteed about the

product quality of a new product or service, and consumers need to rely their evaluations based on the signals given from the companies.

2.2 Sustainable branding

Due to the rising consumption and awareness resulting from the access to technology and information, consumers are more aware and likely to analyse the impacts of their decisions (Ind & Horlings, 2016, p. 2). According to the Triple Bottom Line theory (Elkington, 1998; Kinnunen et al., 2022; Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014), this has resulted in consumers becoming increasingly engaged in sustainability issues that deal with social, environmental, and economic dimensions. According to Lubin & Esty (2010, p. 44-45) and Kinnunen et al. (2022, p. 2), the rising importance of sustainability has led to it being highlighted these days as a matter of strategic importance and it has even been highlighted as one of the latest emergent business megatrends alongside earlier major megatrends throughout decades such as globalization and IT revolution. Kinnunen et al. (2022, p. 2) state that sustainability these days has established a position of being one of the "basic and fundamental competitive market forces" that affect the success of the companies on a short and long run. Sustainability has become a matter that companies need to take into account in order to survive in the market.

Consumers, shareholders, and other stakeholders are now seeking for change by changing their own behaviour first, and as a result, consumers have a significant role when it comes to choosing which company to support. Companies need to focus on differentiating themselves in order the consumers to choose them and therefore, it is essential for companies to focus on managing their brand as corporate sustainability can be accomplished from strong brand and brand reputation (Winit et al., 2023, p. 1). Mahmood & Bashir (2020) suggest that CSR will positively affect the reputation of the brand which will eventually affect the brand equity positively. Supporting this, a study conducted by Torres et al. (2012, p. 21) demonstrated that global brands in terms of the brand equity will be positively affected by involving CSR to company performance. Brands are

positioned by a specific meaning from a wider spectrum of various meanings that consumers associate with a product category (Chen, 2010; Penaloza et al., 2017). In sustainable branding context, a brand will be positioned as environmentally friendly or minimizing the social and economic impact.

Sustainability brands contribute to environment and community but also can leverage brand value through employee satisfaction, goodwill, by strengthening company reputation, by providing value for shareholders through growth, or by increasing shareholder & customer loyalty (Loh & Tan, 2020; Székely & Knirsch, 2005). Brand-conscious consumers will prioritize a brand over its social cause if the values of the brand fit with the consumer (Nascimento & Loureiro, 2024).

Kinnunen et al. (2022, p. 2) highlight the importance of brands as they have been proven to be one of the most important intangible assets that drive sustainable business models. According to the Havas' Meaningful Brands report 2021, 73% of the 395 000 consumers surveyed worldwide believe that brands must make a meaningful and sustainable action now for the good planet and society. 64% of the respondents prefer to buy from companies with a reputation for purpose as well as profit and 53% of the people are willing to pay more for a brand that takes a stand. These result support the rising importance of brands being sustainable. According to Brady (2003, p. 280), stakeholders perceive corporate performance through intangible images of which brands form the notable portion (Brady, 2003; Winit et al., 2023).

The reasons for choosing sustainable branding as the strategy are associated with the benefits of building competitive advantage from differentiation of the competitors and attracting the growing target group of sustainability-oriented customers as well as impacting positively on their purchasing decisions (Chen, 2010; Kinnunen et al., 2022; Vural et al., 2021). Saari et al. (2017, p. 4) emphasize that global brands can gain competitive advantage when the environmental impacts deriving from consumption increase, and the target group of sustainability-oriented consumers increases. Investing in sustainable

performance has been proven to be increasing the company's brand value as well as improving brand image and reputation (Kinnunen et al., 2022, p. 2). Strong brands can also lead in higher pricing as consumers pay for the value that perceived from the brand (Agus Harjoto & Salas, 2017, p. 545). It has been discovered that CSR will enable brand equity as well as reputation that can result in long-term profitability and higher performance (Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, Mahmood & Bashir, 2020; 2014; Winit et al., 2023).

A study conducted by Kinnunen et al. (2022) revealed that eco-innovative firms that implement strategic sustainability will obtain multiple positive indications such as higher average returns on assets and equity as they enable savings on costs, improved quality, as well as predictable earnings streams. In the centrum of this is communication about the practices as they are creating value by their efforts to build a sustainable thus better society and building the brand around it. Kinnunen et al. (2022, p. 4) suggest that positive communication will affect consumer behaviour and that brand knowledge will drive customers towards the brand and result in improving the long-term performance. Here brands can be an effective tool to draw attention to the sustainable image of the company.

The topic of sustainability has gained increasing attention during the last decades. Table 2 demonstrates the current state of the research, starting with the definitions of sustainability. Lately, there has been some research focusing on sustainable branding as well as sustainability performance but still the research remains scarce. There are some sustainable branding models that are introduced in the next sub chapter, but the topic has left without major research.

Table 2. Existing literature on sustainability and branding.

Main topic	**Main findings**	**Author**	**Year**
Triple Bottom Line theory	Sustainability is achieved by three levels: social, environmental, and economic dimensions.	Elkington, J.	1998

Sustainability branding through responsibility.	Transparency results in perceived performance.	Brady, A. K. O.	2002
Social identity's role towards sustainability brands.	Brand knowledge and brand attitudes about organic brands affect buying behaviour for organic food products.	Bartels, J. & Hoogendam, K.	2010
Global brand equity and CSR.	CSR will positively affect global brand equity.	Torres et al.	2012
Intertwining sustainability and branding through marketing.	Sustainability needs to be a prioritized mission in order for it to be implemented effectively.	Kumar, V. & Christodoulopoulou, A.	2014
Consumer perceptions in terms of eco-friendliness in a cross-national context.	Consumers between countries perceive brands differently in terms of the eco-friendliness.	Saari et al.	2017
NGO-firm partnerships as a way to build a sustainable brand.	Co-branding through NGO-firm partnerships (labelling) affects positively on the consumer trust and product and brand evaluations regarding co-branded sustainable products.	Heinl et al.	2021
The effects of strategic sustainability on sustainability performance and brand.	Sustainability performance is better if the marketing efforts are high. Eco-innovative firms are likely to have higher brand value.	Kinnunen et al.	2022
Sustainability brand model.	Sustainability and brands are strongly influenced by consumer knowledge-focused perspective.	Winit et al.	2023

2.2.1 Sustainable brand creation

Sustainability branding has emerged initially from corporate branding that focuses on building long-term relationships by encouraging stakeholders' support to evolve organizational attributes and communicate about them to larger groups (Maon et al., 2021, p. 64). Maon et al. state that there has been a shift behind sustainable brands toward building social interaction between the company and the environment, and moreover, including environmental, social, and economic performance to the branding process which represent the core ideas of CSR and Triple Bottom Line theory.

As sustainability has been highlighted as a strategic importance, companies need to focus on building a comprehensive strategy on how to implement the sustainability activities and how to build the sustainable brand (Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014). Kumar

& Christodoulopoulou (2014) describe the appealing sustainability-oriented customers as follows; first, companies need to communicate the sustainability practices for the customers; second, these practices must be implemented in their operations; and finally, they must focus on transforming the practices into associations that build the brand image. They suggest that corporate brand can be affected by sustainability associations resulting from sustainability activities that include social or environmental practices. They also state that marketing activities are an essential part in integrating the sustainability to the brand. These associations related to sustainability can be formed through various marketing efforts such as advertising, packaging as well as other promotional efforts that create the awareness of the brand and its sustainability. Through clear and consistent marketing, brands increase the awareness of themselves as sustainable actors.

Kumar and Christodoulopoulou (2014) suggest a framework of implementation of integrating sustainability and branding. According to the framework, first, companies need to have a clear sustainability strategy on the issues it will address. Second, in order to achieve the intended associations, all sustainability activities must be consistent with the company's actions and operations. At this stage, it is important for the companies to plan, carry out and measure the actions that are fulfilled. Lastly, companies must manage the brand and its associations by specifying the essential sustainability outcomes and communicating about them through reporting, advertisements as well as product attributes thus building the brand image resulting in greater brand value.

Simao & Lisboa (2017) describe six different qualities that a brand may possess: 1) attributes that relate to a specific set of brand and product characteristics, 2) functional and emotional benefits in the minds of consumers derived from the evaluation of the attributes, 3) values that the brand communicates about, 4) culture as the brand may represent a specific culture, 5) personality that will be communicated through marketing activities, as well as 5) user definition that the brand reflects the buyer or user of the product or service. They also state that in order for the company to sell sustainable

products, the green attributes of the brand must be communicated clearly through marketing activities.

Brands represent the company's desired image. Kinnunen et al. (2020) have researched sustainability brand creation and have presented a theoretical model on how sustainability brand is derived based on the conducted study. They have categorized four elements that affect positively to the sustainable brand of a company: marketing, business strategy, management, and eco-innovations. A strong sustainable brand image is achieved through strong communications and marketing activities. Kinnunen et al. (2020, p. 4) state that companies first must include sustainability into their business strategy, and then form the brand along with it. A brand identity must be defined in a clear and coherent manner. Supporting this, they suggest that internal brand building and the behaviour of the employees should be aligned with the business strategy regarding sustainability. Vallaster & de Chernatory (2006, p. 761-762) highlight that internal brand-related behaviour plays a crucial role in sustainable branding as it positively affects the coherent brand image. Eco-innovations provide various positive affects regarding the sustainability brand, such as brand associations, brand trust and even brand differentiation (Kinnunen et al., 2020, p. 5).

Supporting the model by Kinnunen et al. (2020), Winit et al. (2023, p. 18-20) have extended the common elements and further deepened into the issue. Their model is illustrated in Figure 3. The first step in sustainability brand creation is to strengthen the corporate sustainability performance by involving brand knowledge and its value to the corporate culture. At this stage, stakeholder focus is the core value among other sustainability values. They also highlight that it is important to include sustainability practices such as green initiatives and socially responsible activities, in developing and strengthening the brand as brand is in the centrum of focusing to the opportunities to build a greater performance. The role of brand communication is a crucial element for building the sustainability brand as it can be used to build congruence between the internal and external stakeholders. Supporting the model by Winit et al. (2023), Gupta & Kumar (2013,

p. 312) also highlight that consumer behaviour can be affected through effective communication about the sustainability initiatives. Brand knowledge is also vital element for building the differentiation value of the brand, and this can only be achieved if stakeholders acknowledge the brand and its elements and values.

According to the model presented by Winit et al. (2023), after acknowledging the brand value from the differentiation and the brand knowledge, stakeholders start to behave sustainably by adopting sustainability behaviours, co-operating with stakeholders, and focusing on purchase intentions. The sustainability behaviour will result in strong relationship between the stakeholders and the company. There are different kinds of relationships such as stakeholder participation, collaboration as well as customer relationship. Integrating sustainability to the corporate culture and communicating clearly about it, consumers start to form associations about a sustainable brand (Gupta & Kumar, 2013, p. 313). Alongside the core product or service, brand equity adds the overall value to it. It can be developed through the sustainability practices and stakeholder relationship can be strengthened by offering various types of advantages for the stakeholders. Eventually the long-term relationships can improve brand equity. The stakeholders' assessments have an impact on the brand equity and its value and according to Winit et al. (2023), research seem to be concerted, that brand equity will result in corporate sustainability.

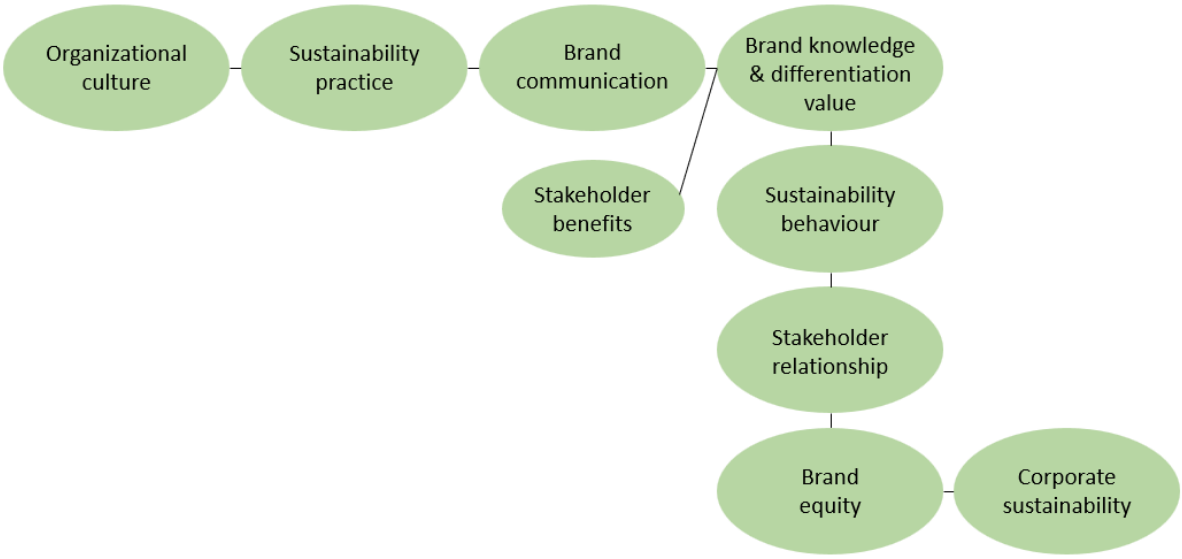

Figure 3: Sustainability brand building (Winit et al., 2023, p. 19).

Corporate brand credibility and brand equity are in the centrum of the sustainable branding process. Brands can signal through various marketing mix elements about their symbolic meanings on what do they stand for and what values do they advocate (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Hur et al., 2014). Companies will communicate about their economic, social, and environmental commitment. These engagements will act as an attribute of the company brand and act as a signal, in accordance with the signaling theory, thus creating brand credibility that plays a crucial role in building brand equity (Hur et al., 2014, p. 78).

2.2.2 Greenwashing as a risk causing brand mistrust

Not every communication and marketing activities are clear and consistent. Companies' misleading impact through disinformation about the sustainability commitments plays a crucial role in the brand trust and associations of consumers (Fatemi et al., 2023, p. 530). Fatemi et al. (2023, p. 530) state that this effect of *greenwashing* can negatively affect the brand trustworthiness and brand associations in terms of sustainability of the brand. They state that greenwashing can be done through advertisements that provide falsified

claims regarding the sustainable attributes of the brand, such as related to the origin of the used materials of the products. Sustainability attributes aim to function as signals providing information about the quality of the products but with greenwashing, the attributes are falsified thus providing a misleading brand image.

Greenwashing can cause negative consumer perceptions not only for co-brands, but also for the parent brands through the spillover effects. It can affect negatively to brand equity and purchase behaviour (Fatemi et al., 2023, p. 535). The negative brand image generated through greenwashing of the other parent brand may cause undesired associations towards the other parent brand, causing the overall evaluation of the co-brand being negative.

2.3 Consumer evaluations in terms of sustainability of a co-brand

This chapter combines the literature in topics of sustainability, consumer evaluations formation as well as co-branding. The theoretical framework is based on combining the existing theories about consumer evaluations with sustainable branding strategy.

Figure 4 illustrates the summary of the theories that have been introduced in this thesis and functions as the theoretical framework of this study. According to it, consumer evaluations affect the brand image of both brands forming the co-brand, as well as the final co-brand as a result from it. The brands should have sustainable attributes and communicate clearly about them. This study also highlights the creation of sustainable brand that is formed through co-branding collaboration.

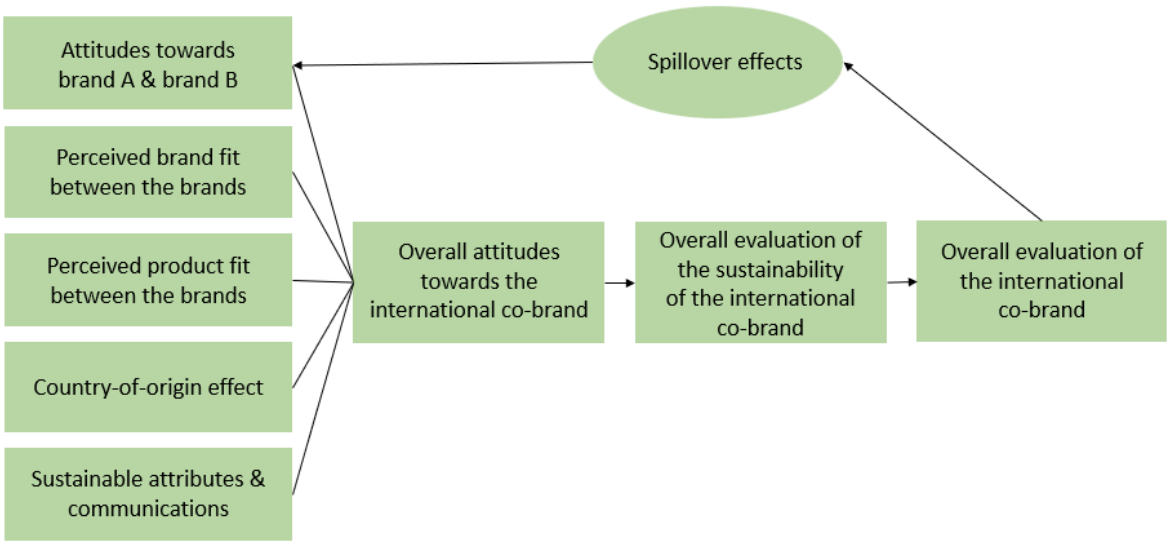

Figure 4: The formation of overall consumer evaluations regarding international co-brand and its sustainability.

In the centrum of the study is to understand the factors that affect consumer evaluations on sustainable branding through co-branding. Brand attitudes towards each parent brand forming the co-brand, perceived fit between these brands and the fit between the products, as well as the spillover effects affect the overall consumer evaluations (Dickinson & Barker, 2006, p. 78-81). In this study, the sustainability has been introduced as one of the central elements impacting on the overall evaluations that influence the co-brand. Lii et al. (2011, p. 20) argue that brand attitudes have a great impact to the purchasing behaviour. A study conducted by Erdem & Swait (2004) revealed that if a brand is seen as credible, the chances are greater that consumers are likely to consider the brand when they make purchase choices. Lii et al. (2011, p. 20) propose that when CSR is included in a company's marketing activities and if consumers perceive it as credible, it is likely to affect positively on the purchase behaviour. They also state that companies should communicate about the CSR initiatives in order to improve the brand image and the company's reputation. The perceived fit is important for the successful partnership between two brands. The co-brand needs to have consistency and logicality deriving from the combination of the partner brands (Mahmood & Bashir, 2020).

Signaling theory plays a significant role not only in theories of consumer evaluations in co-brands in general but also regarding the sustainability in the formed co-brands. Heinl et al. (2021, p. 3) suggest that companies should be able to communicate about the sustainability attributes and features in a transparent and reliable way in order to decrease the information asymmetry through these signals. Clear communication results in trustworthy brand in the minds of consumers that increases other factors such as enhanced brand image (Heinl et al., 2021, p. 3). The communication needs to be consistent and can be executed through sustainability labels or corporate communications via reporting or website communications. Heinl et al. (2021, p. 6) state that the extent of communication depends on the level of the expertise of the consumers. They suggest that the more specific is the sustainability communication, the more credible image the consumers perceive. However, excessive amounts of information may cause the communication to be unclear or confused, especially for consumers that are not particularly sustainable-oriented. All in all, the familiarity of sustainability-related information derived as signals of the brand plays an important role. These particular signals are derived from earlier experiences and attitudes towards the brand (Heinl et al., 2021, p. 6).

Consumers' awareness of the brand, the formed associations about it as well as brand images through existing brand knowledge are essential part of the brand value creation in the minds of consumers (Keller, 1993, p. 3). Keller (1993) has developed a model, Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE), that can be used to describe these elements and measure them in order to evaluate if the alliance brand has low- or high-equity (Lee & Decker, 2016, p. 548). High-equity brands can have premium pricing without affecting the current number of customers (Besharat, 2010, p. 1243).

Spillover effects also affect the sustainability of the co-brand. As spillover effects refer to the transforming evaluations from one brand to the other in a co-brand, evaluations of one brand's sustainability may affect the evaluations of the other through the co-brand.

This pertains both positive and negative spillovers and depends on the state of the reputation of a brand (Heinl et al., 2021, p. 5).

3 Research design

In this chapter, the research design will be presented, and the chosen research methods will be clarified. The chosen method of data collection, semi-structured focus-group interviews are described in depth. Also, the trustworthiness of the research will be introduced.

3.1 Research strategy

In this research, a qualitative method was chosen to discover the factors that affect consumers evaluations on sustainable brands of international co-brands. Qualitative research aims to reason the context of a certain problem as well as focusing on the complexity of the problem (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 5). According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015, p. 5), instead of setting hypotheses about the phenomenon as in quantitative research, qualitative research focuses on understanding it. Supporting this, Hennink (2020, p. 10) states that qualitative methods allow focusing on the perspectives of the study participants and identifying the issues as well as the interpretations and meanings that explain the behaviour of the participants. As this study focuses on the consumer evaluations, a qualitative method is suitable for identifying their evaluations and attitudes towards the brands.

Hennink (2020, p. 10) describes the qualitative research as the interpretive approach as the focus of the research is on evaluating the behaviour, opinions, and emotions of the study participants. The research answers to questions “why” and “how” that explain the phenomenon. In this study, the target is to evaluate how and why are the certain attitudes and associations are formed in the mind of consumers. Supporting the nature of the qualitative research, focus-group interviews were conducted for five different focus-groups, in which 18 interviewees in total participated.

There are various theories behind sustainable branding, co-branding as well as consumer evaluations, but not so many existing research about the connection between the topics. Therefore, this research focuses on explaining and understanding the connection between consumer evaluations on sustainable brands formed through international co-brands and qualitative method was chosen in order to analyse it.

3.2 Case co-brand selection

This study focuses on researching the ways how consumers evaluate the sustainable brand of international co-brands. In order to analyse this, a case co-brand between a Finnish design-lifestyle company Marimekko and German athletic apparel producer Adidas was chosen. For this study, under further investigation is the co-brand, Adidas x Marimekko. Five different focus-group interviews were conducted based on this co-brand. This specific co-brand was chosen for the case collaboration of this study based on its origin deriving from two international brands that differ from each other in terms of the size, market, and brands. The target of choosing this co-brand is to generate the country-of-origin effect in the responses of international consumers through the case interviews. Marimekko is a well-known Finnish brand and renowned from its distinctive, iconic patterns and colours (Marimekko Oyj, n.d.). Their product portfolio includes for example clothing, accessories, and interior textiles. Marimekko has produced multiple co-brands with various different brands, few to mention are collaborations with a Finnish airline Finnair and a furniture and interior company IKEA.

The collection has been done in co-operation with the German athletic apparel and equipment producer Adidas (Adidas Group, n.d. -a). These companies differ from each other in various ways in terms of e.g. size, markets, and brand awareness. When these companies are perceived from a global perspective, Marimekko can be seen as a smaller brand, and Adidas can be considered as a mass producer of a large, global brand. The total sales of Adidas Group were 21,4 billion euros in 2023 (Adidas Group, n.d. -a). In comparison, the total sales of Marimekko Oyj were 0,506 billion euros in the same year

(Marimekko Oyj, 2024). The markets between the companies differ a lot of in terms of size and location as Adidas retains a worldwide market as Marimekko is well-known especially in North Europe as well as in Asia.

Both companies announce their commitment to sustainability and have set a specific sustainability targets. Marimekko announces its sustainability targets via their website as well as promote the products through marketing communications that advance their timeless and quality designs that promote sustainability of the products (Marimekko Oyj, n.d.). These sustainability targets also include reducing greenhouse gas emissions, promoting social sustainability referring to equality as well as increasing the responsible choices through the supply chain. Adidas has also defined clear targets in sustainability regarding the elements of the triple bottom line: Adidas communicates about its environmental and social impacts in a way that the business is profitable (Adidas Group, n.d. -b). These targets refer to climate neutrality of the supply chain, environmentally friendly produced products through responsible materials, reducing greenhouse gas emissions as well as managing the issues related to human rights.

The collection combines the distinctive patterns of Marimekko as well as the functional sport apparel of Adidas, thus the focus of the collection is combining the functionality with modern art. The co-branded products have been sold at Adidas' channels all over the world. The key element of the collection is the use of recycled materials of the clothing which both companies have communicated about. (Marimekko Oyj, n.d.) The collaboration between these two brands enables obtaining new and larger customer base.

3.3 Methods of Data Collection

The primary method of data collection in this study are semi-structured focus-group interviews. With this method, the author will have a certain set of themes and questions related to the topic (Puusa et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2016). The interview guide was planned in detail in advance, and it was based on the main research question and the

objectives of the study, and the focus-group interviews were executed according to the interview guide (Appendix 1). The interview questions were based on the co-brand alliance between Adidas and Marimekko. Billups (2021) highlights that qualitative interviews aim to capture the perceptions, feelings and experiences of individual interviewees, and the role of the interviewer is to guide the discussion and facilitate the interviews. The author prompted the discussion about consumer evaluations, the perceived fit between the brands as well as the sustainability of the co-brand.

Semi-structured focus-group interviews are used to explore a certain topic that is researched in a specific organizational context (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 312). In this study, consumer evaluations of the sustainable brand resulting from Adidas x Marimekko are examined. Semi-structured interviews, like qualitative research in general, also help understanding the research problem in terms of *what*, *how* and *why* (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016). The interview questions were presented in the form that they persuade the interviewees to describe their own experiences and share opinions on which factors play an important role. Many of the questions are in the form of "How would you describe" or "What affects", allowing the interviewee to respond more freely and express thoughts based on the own experiences. Focus-group interviews are useful when the aim is not only analysing the thoughts of the participants but also analyse the reasons behind them (Billups, 2021).

Billups (2021) proposes that participants of the focus-group are selected based on certain commonalities. The participants that joined these case interviews had earlier experience or knowledge about Adidas and/or to some extent of Marimekko, and they are familiar with topics of sustainability, at least to some extent. This allows the author to target the interview questions to a specific direction towards the desired outcomes (Puusa et al., 2020). All the interviewees were around the same age, the targeted age scale was 20-35 years-old-interviewees. In order to investigate the cultural differences and their effect on the consumer evaluations, the research was executed for five groups from different cultures. Groups of Finnish and German interviewees were specifically

chosen in order to identify and analyse the country-of-origin effect and how it affects how the interviewees perceive the Marimekko and Adidas. Group 1 included 4 persons from Asia, group 2 included 4 persons from Canada, group 3 included 3 persons from Germany, group 4 included 3 persons from Africa and lastly, group 5 included 4 persons from Finland. The following demographics about age, education, gender, status, and nationality of the interview participants are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Demographics of the focus-groups.

Group	Interviewee	Age	Education	Gender	Status	Nationality
1	Interviewee 1	24	Business undergraduate	Male	Full-time student	Taiwanese
1	Interviewee 2	27	BSc in Business Administration	Female	Full-time student	Taiwanese
1	Interviewee 3	26	BSc in Business Administration	Female	Full-time student	Taiwanese
1	Interviewee 4	22	BSc in Business Administration	Female	Full-time student	Taiwanese
2	Interviewee 5	21	Business undergraduate	Female	Full-time student	Canadian
2	Interviewee 6	21	Business undergraduate	Female	Full-time student	Canadian
2	Interviewee 7	22	BSc in International Business & Sustainable Business	Male	Student & Part-time working	Canadian
2	Interviewee 8	22	Bachelor of Business and Bachelor of Computer Science	Male	Full-time student	Canadian
3	Interviewee 9	26	MSc in Economics and Business administration	Female	Full-time working	German

			(double degree)			
3	Interviewee 10	27	MSc in Media	Female	Full-time working	German
3	Interviewee 11	26	MSc in Business Administration	Female	Full-time student	German
4	Interviewee 12	33	MSc in Data Analytics	Male	Full-time student & Part-time working	Nigerian
4	Interviewee 13	27	MSc in Data Analytics	Female	Full-time student	Nigerian
4	Interviewee 14	26	MSc in Sustainable tourism	Male	Full-time student	Senegalese
5	Interviewee 15	24	MSc in Economics & Business Administration	Female	Full-time student	Finnish
5	Interviewee 16	24	MSc in Economics & Business Administration	Female	Full-time student	Finnish
5	Interviewee 17	25	MSc in Economics & Business Administration	Male	Full-time student	Finnish
5	Interviewee 18	24	MSc in Economics & Business Administration	Male	Student & Part-time working	Finnish

These interviews were held for each group individually and executed through Teams during week 14 (Table 4). In each interview, visual materials from Adidas, Marimekko and their co-brand Adidas x Marimekko were shown for the interviewees in order to give the interviewees a clear vision about the collaboration (Appendix 2). The timing for each interview changed from 30 to 48 minutes. Every interview was recorded and transcribed.

Table 4: Dates and timings of the focus-group interviews.

Group	Date and time	Duration
1	2.4.2024 at 16.00	48 min
2	2.4.2024 at 17.30	40 min
3	3.4.2024 at 19.00	37 min
4	7.4.2024 at 13.00	45 min
5	7.4.2024 at 15.00	30 min

The interviews were divided to three distinctive areas. In the interviews, first the interviewees there were questions about the brand images about Adidas and Marimekko. Secondly, questions about the brand and product fit between the brands were introduced. Lastly, the sustainability of each brand as well as the co-brand was discussed through some questions related to the factors in terms of the sustainability of the brands and the co-brand. The most significant factors affecting the sustainability were also discussed.

3.4 Qualitative content analysis as a research method

The collected data in this research was analysed based on a qualitative content analysis. Qualitative content analysis aims to describe the phenomenon under research clearly and objectively (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). Through qualitative content analysis, the reader will receive a consistent and clarified perception of the topic. The systematically collected data is divided into sections, categorised through definitions, and assembled in a way that results in logical entity of a qualitative analysis. Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015, p. 121) suggest that qualitative content analysis aims to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon that is being researched.

Usually, the data for qualitative content analysis is collected through written and visual formats such as transcribed interviews, documents, articles, web pages, video recordings

(Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 122). In this study, the data was collected through an interview that was conducted through Teams. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in order for the researcher to form the content analysis. During the interviews, the interviewees were shown materials about the co-brand that required interpretation. Schreier (2012) suggests that qualitative content analysis is suitable for materials that require interpretation to some degree.

Schreier (2012) presents that an important part of forming a comprehensive perception about the topic under research is to come up with coding frame that helps to filter the data according to the research question and objectives. These categorizations functioned as a specific set of themes that help the researcher to identify the most essential topics regarding the research question (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). According to Schreier (2012), the coding will help the researcher to form the key aspects of the material and focus on the most essential topics. There were three main dimensions of coding in this research; the semi-structured interview guide was divided into three main categories – consumer evaluations on Adidas, Marimekko and their co-brand Adidas x Marimekko, the brand and product fit between them as well as the sustainability of the brands (Appendix 1). These categories support the research question of this study, and the interview questions were based on finding the connections between the existing theory and the research question.

The analysis was executed in a following way: first the data was transcribed and categorized according to the above-mentioned categories. Then, the main topics related to the research question and objectives were identified through the specific set of categories that function as themes related to the research question. This will help the researcher form connections and identify appearances of certain elements regarding the topic ((Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). After this categorization, connections between the results derived from the interviews were recognized and generalizations referring to the research question and existing theories were done.

As a part of this qualitative analysis, the author shares quotations derived from the focus-group interviews. Quotation is used to support the interpretations or explanations that are presented (Eldh et al., 2020). The quotes are used to provide explanations and to demonstrate the perspectives of the participants. In this thesis, quotation is used to illustrate the reasons behind the interpretations derived from the theory. Quotation helps the reader to connect the theory with the empirical results. Quotes function as the evidence that aim to improve the accuracy of the analysis, thus increasing the trustworthiness of the study (Eldh et al., 2020).

3.5 Trustworthiness of the study

The aim of this research is to clarify the factors that affect the way how consumers evaluate sustainable brands that are formed through international co-brands. The aim is also to provide a comprehensive understanding of the existing theories about co-branding, sustainability and sustainable branding as well how do consumers form their evaluations towards brands. There are some limitations of this study, and the most essential to notice is that this case study research, and the data collection is based on the group interviews about the case collaboration, Adidas x Marimekko.

The primary data collection method is semi-structured group interviews, and it is possible that interviewees perceive questions differently which may affect the validity of this study (Vilkka, 2021). The interviews were conducted for five different groups from five different cultures in which 18 interviewees took part in total. As the sample is rather small, this study cannot be generalized for larger audiences.

Lincoln & Cuba (1985) propose that the overall trustworthiness of a qualitative study is evaluated through four different dimensions: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Billups, 2020; Eriksson & Kovalainen). According to Cuba (1981), *credibility* refers to the consistency of the research and the repeatability of the research results. In order the research to be credible, the researcher must be familiar with the topic

and make sure that the data is valid enough to meet the intended objectives. The results should be able to be repeated by other researchers in order it to be credible. Eldh et al. (2020) suggest that credibility will be achieved by various sources of theories. The empirical part of this study was based on the existing theories that are summarized as a comprehensive literature review of the main areas of research. The interview guide was developed based on the researcher's familiarity with the topics, and possible topics were expected to arise during group interviews.

The second dimension, *transferability,* on the other hand refers to the degree of similarity between the existing research and the topic that is being researched. The trustworthiness is achieved by its transferability in situation where there are links and connections between the existing research as well as the current topic. In this thesis, transferability was guaranteed by linking the existing theories to the empirical part. The semi-structured interview guide was based on the existing theories in order to investigate the topics in depth.

The third dimension, *dependability,* concerns the amount of information that is provided for the reader in order to the topic to be understood correctly and comprehensively. Dependability also emphasizes the logicality of the research process which is conducted traceably through documented procedures. This thesis was compiled by exploring the existing state of research of the topics and forming a comprehensive understanding for the researcher. The research question, theoretical framework as well as the data collection was based on the understanding. In the empirical part, interviewees were provided a set of materials of the co-brand in order for them to perceive it comprehensively.

Lastly the fourth dimension, *confirmability,* emphasizes the clear and consistent linking between the research findings and interpretations so that they are easily comprehended by the reader. In this thesis, quotation was used in order to illustrate and provide proofs about the linking between the empirical data and the existing theories. The quotations help the reader to follow the topics that are being discussed.

4 Findings

In this section, the main findings of the empirical research will be presented and discussed. In chapter 4.1., the group interviews are introduced and the general perceptions that were revealed. In chapter 4.2. the main findings derived from the interviews are applied into the theories and the theoretical framework of this thesis. In this chapter, the analysis is illustrated through quotation that was generated through the semi-structured focus-group interviews.

4.1 Description of the focus-group interviews

In focus-group interview 1, there were a group of four Taiwanese consumers. Especially Adidas was familiar for each interviewee, and one interviewee recognized Marimekko. Adidas was familiar in terms of its brand and the consumers had made purchases from Adidas earlier. The general brand image related to Adidas was associated as a basic sporty brand, deriving from the image of having monochronic products. On the contrary, Marimekko's brand image was described as unique and fashionable. There were some notions that Marimekko can be seen as more expensive brand as it falls into higher price category when comparing other brands. The image of a luxurious brand was also supported by the perception of Marimekko's stores being located next to other luxurious brands. The associations of an energetic and colourful brand as well as their targeting towards older consumers emerged during the conversations about Marimekko. Adidas was seen as a powerful brand yet falling behind from the trends.

"For me, Adidas I think is the basic brand for the sport. So, like their design is all black and white." (Interviewee 4).

"Adidas for us is no longer very trendy. Maybe it's because there are a lot of other brands now that we can choose from, so people buying Adidas is less than before. It's more of a functional than the trends." (Interviewee 2).

The co-brand was seen as a positive collaboration between the brands. As this focus-group perceived Adidas as losing the trendiness of its brand, the co-brand was seen to increase the trendiness of Adidas. Through this co-brand, the brands were seen to gain access to new customer groups with different ages and styles and a way to be creative. This enhances the brand image of the co-brand and strengthens the image of parent brands though spillover effects.

"I think it's going to be positive impact for both to add some supportive element into the brand, and also that it helps to add the fashion sense into Adidas." (Interviewee 2).

Marimekko's brand is really colourful, and Adidas is really basic, with black and white. The combination is good because they will face customers with different ages, and different the styles, like maybe the client of Adidas doesn't have such a colourful product. If they have Marimekko, maybe they can try something new. (Interviewee 4).

In focus-group interview 2, four Canadian consumers took part. Everybody knew Adidas and had purchased something from it at some point. For two interviewees, Adidas was mentioned as a brand that they usually buy thrifted. One interviewee knew Marimekko in advance, and another interviewee recognized the Unikko-pattern of Marimekko after seeing some pictures and videos about the co-brand that were shown to the group. Marimekko was associated with positive feelings as a happy, colourful, and upbeat brand. Adidas was seen as a good quality sports brand that is more innovative than Marimekko due to its timeless and classic designs that were seen more conservative.

Adidas is maybe a lot more innovative than Marimekko, they're more just timeless and with the classic designs. (Interviewee 8)

The co-brand was seen as unexpected yet unique, based on Marimekko's usual designs that were seen as classical. The unexpectedness was derived from the abnormal products and smaller size of Marimekko and the lower recognizability among Canadian consumers. However, the co-brand seemed logical regarding the fit between the

collaborating brands. Marimekko was mentioned to be missing leisure wear from its product portfolio, to which the co-brand was seen as a positive response. Focus-group 2 considered Adidas as the main brand in the co-brand due to its stronger recognizability.

"I have never seen anything like the brand, like the pattern and everything. It's pretty unique, and I feel like it's different from the classic style." (Interviewee 6).

"It's a collaboration, but I feel like Adidas is more known, so it's more like Adidas is the main brand." (Interviewee 6).

"I would say that this partnership makes a lot of sense to me because it's like a great way for Marimekko to expand their offering into, like, kind of the leisure wear." (Interviewee 5).

In focus-group interview 3, a group of three German consumers took part. Adidas was familiar for the participants, but Marimekko was rather well-known. One interviewee did know Marimekko in advance, and one interviewee recognized the brand after being showed the photos and videos of the brand that were provided in the interview (Appendix 2). The brand images of Adidas were associated strongly as being a sports brand, thus the brand was also described as less elegant and more functional compared to Marimekko's brand. Like group 1, group 3 also considered Adidas' brand as plain and monochronic. On the contrary, Marimekko was seen as timeless and eye catching. The Unikko-pattern was seen as clean and modern, and the brand image was associated with these perceptions. Their use of colour was seen as a playful and fun thing that evoked positive feelings.

"I think actually the first time when I saw Marimekko, I would say like it's very like a timeless brand for me, because I think even though they have very eye-catching patterns, I think it's still something, what you can wear for years and decades, I would say. So, I think it's timeless, but I think it's also not really for a specific age range, I would say so. I think it's also made for like several ages or generations." (Interviewee 9).

"I think Adidas is way more supportive and less elegant, very supportive and often black and white, maybe sometimes like colours, but not any patterns or something like more you one colour on one piece." (Interviewee 11).

Target-group 3 considered the products of the co-brand energetic and fresh. The co-brand was seen especially beneficial for Adidas as it could refresh its brand that was seen as outdated and lacking the associations, such as fresh and modern, that were generated through Marimekko's involvement. Including Marimekko's patterns through the co-brand into sportswear was surprising but delivered positive reactions.

"I think it looks like the perfect thing for Adidas to do to get some more modern, cool and fresh image and some changing up to its brand." (Interviewee 11).

"I think it was actually a cool mix. That's why I still had these leggings in mind because, when I think of sport leggings, I think maybe Nike or Adidas or like those type of sport brands. But then seeing like Marimekko prints, it's very eye-catching." (Interviewee 9).

Focus-group interview 4 had three participants from Africa. Adidas was well-known for all the interviewees, but Marimekko was not familiar. Adidas was strongly associated with the logo and their Three stripes -pattern, and their brand image was described as strong sport brand with a worldwide reputation. Marimekko's brand on the other hand was described as colourful and bold, and it was associated with nature deriving from the Unikko-pattern.

"I think that it's cool just because I like the flowery patterns that I've seen because it's, I mean flower is something close to nature." (Interviewee 12).

"The three lines and you know the brand are recognised everywhere in the world and they stand out for their excellence in sports like the design, the footwear, clothing and everything. I think it's just an iconic brand and that's mostly it." (Interviewee 12).

The co-brand was seen as a positive collaboration between the brands. The co-brand on the other hand was seen as a combination of both brands, but Adidas still having a stronger appearance in the products. Therefore, the co-brand was associated more with Adidas' brand than Marimekko's or equally both. The co-brand was noted to awake interest towards Marimekko as a less familiar brand. The co-brand was seen to be targeted for younger people and therefore the targeting was seen as narrow.

"To me it makes sense and even the video is quite interesting to see. I'm motivated to buy the two products, seeing the videos of the collaboration, the collaboration is really great is innovative and it's inspiring to want to like get the products. So, seeing the two brands collaborate, I can say OK, I can go to the Marimekko's website to check what's their brand is all about to see their products and stuff like that." (Interviewee 13).

In focus-group interview 5, four Finnish consumers took part. Both Adidas and Marimekko were familiar for all interviewees, and most of them had bought something from both brands. Adidas was described as a huge and sporty brand and Marimekko was associated with sustainability, quality and being a Finnish brand. The change in the target consumers of Marimekko was emerged during the interview; Marimekko used to be a brand for older consumers but these days it's a youthful brand deriving from the use of colours.

The co-brand itself was described as a good combination of both brands. The co-brand was seen as combining Marimekko's patterns and Adidas' products. However, one of the interviewees also associated the co-brand more to Adidas' brand than equally formed of both brands. This was mentioned to derive from the streetwear style of Adidas that was associated to be targeted for younger consumer groups.

"I know about the co-branding before because I have their product. I bought the shoes that were part of the Adidas and Marimekko co-branding collection, and I liked it very much because I think I Adidas is doing sports clothes, but I also like the patterns, colours and design of Marimekko, so I get like the best of both worlds." (Interviewee 15).

"I would say it's more of the Adidas streetwear collection." (Interviewee 18).

There were differences in the opinions between the interviewees of each group. These differences in terms of the importance of sustainability, factors affecting buying decisions in general, and the significance of COO effect were emerged during the focus-group interviews which are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Differences between focus-group interviews.

Group:	**Importance of sustainability:**	**Factors affecting buying decision:**	**The significance COO effect:**
1	Important factor affecting buying decisions, but the product features affect significantly.	Price, product features.	Clear effect.
2	Important factor affecting buying decisions, but price affects the most.	Price.	No effect.
3	Important factor affecting buying decisions, but price affects the most.	Price, product quality.	Clear effect.
4	Important factor affecting buying decisions.	Quality, country-or-origin.	Clear effect.
5	Important factor affecting buying decisions, but price affects the most.	Price, product quality.	Clear effect.

Price was considered the most important factor affecting whether to choose a sustainable brand or not. Only one group, focus-group 1, considered product features over sustainability instead of the price. Nonetheless, sustainability is an important factor when making purchase decisions. Other important factors affecting the buying behaviour included attributes related to product quality and the country-of-origin. Focus-groups 1 and 4 highlighted the importance of country-of-production as well as the country-of-origin of the materials that were used. These elements were perceived to provide guarantee of the quality and sustainability. Thus, for four groups, country-of-origin effect was clearly identified, but one group remained without further acknowledgment.

4.2 Consumer evaluation in terms of the sustainability of the international co-brand

The aim of this study is to find connections deriving from the group interviews applied into the existing theories of consumer evaluations, international co-branding, and sustainable branding.

4.2.1 Consumer evaluations

The quality of the products of this co-brand was seen as a good quality. The perceptions of the quality of the products were derived based on their earlier experiences and evaluations of the brands. Adidas' brand was seen for all the groups as a trustworthy sport brand and Marimekko's brand was associated as quality derived from its long-lasting designs. Marimekko's products were seen more quality as it being a smaller brand which was associated with better quality, especially compared with Adidas that is a large, global mass-producer. Some of the interviewees also mentioned that Nordic fashion brands can be associated with quality and sustainability. Some interviewees considered the quality of the co-branded products to be on the level of Adidas. When comparing Marimekko's quality to Adidas', the quality level of Marimekko's products was seen superior.

Signaling theory suggests that product attributes function as symbols that aim to reduce the asymmetry in the market. Yu et al. (2021, p. 344) suggest that brands are positioned based on the associations of the product and service attributes. Marimekko was associated with quality deriving from prize, style, and materials use. Adidas on the other hand, was associated with trustworthiness and quality. Some groups perceived the co-brand as complementary, and this is especially beneficial for supplemental brands that benefit from the signals indicating high-quality (Yu et al., 2021, p. 344).

It looks very trustworthy to me as soon as I see the Adidas logo. I think that I can rely on the quality, and on the materials to be long lasting when I buy from Adidas. I know that it's going to be good materials and good stitching. So, I do think that it's the same with the with the co-brand. It looks the same for me. (Interviewee 10).

I think the often the Nordic clothing brands have this that they take maybe more into account, like sustainability and materials and stuff what I connect with the like Nordic clothing brands. So, I would trust this co-brand as well. (Interviewee 11).

I also thought that it looked very high quality specifically because all the pieces were very unique. And I find that when items are like making a statement, they usually cost more because in fast fashion, things that look more like basic or trendy are usually more like accessible and cheaper. So, it seemed like all the items would be on the more expensive side and then I would equate that to also being like higher quality. (Interviewee 5).

"I think in general that Marimekko has maybe better quality than Adidas, so I wouldn't be expecting the quality of Marimekko. I see it like that there is like Adidas products that are Adidas' quality but with the Marimekko's patterns and designs." (Interviewee 15).

Interviewees all agreed that belonging to one culture will affect the purchasing behaviour and purchase decisions. Especially, the expression through dressing was highlighted as one of the main impacts for purchase choices in fashion industry that derives from cultural differences. As this co-brand operates in the fashion industry, this effect was identified. Culture impacts the motivation and reasons behind purchase decisions and that affects how consumers behave (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020, p. 40).

"For me, I think in Asia, I'm not sure it's correct for everyone or not, but I thought in Asia we would not frequently to wear the clothes or shoes are so colourful. So maybe this kind of style is not so popular in Asia." (Interviewee 3).

"Canada is very big into leisure wear. So, I feel like that influences the brands that I buy from. I would say that this partnership makes a lot of sense to me because it's like a great way for Marimekko to expand their offering into, like, kind of the leisure wear." (Interviewee 5).

Remarkably, the country-of-origin (COO) effect could be noted for the Finnish, German, Asian and African consumers. Sometimes the effect influences the buying behaviour unconsciously. German interviewees considered Adidas automatically as a high-quality and trustworthy brand that you can trust when making purchase decisions. Marimekko in turn was perceived as Finnish design that is automatically associated with high quality and long-lastingness. In addition, the sustainability was considered as one of the factors that were associated with the performance of Marimekko as a smaller brand. Groups 1 and 4 considered COO as an important factor regarding the production and the use of raw materials. According to Fong et al. (2015, p. 24), the origin of the brand functions as a cue that the signaling theory suggest being associated with quality as it reflects the value formed symbolically and emotionally. Thus, both Marimekko and Adidas awaken some emotional and symbolical value based on the earlier assumptions and brand image that are associated with good quality.

"It's like a brand, at least with us Germans that I would say that we would fully trust or like trust that it's good quality because we have known it already for years, and we wore them as children's then when we got a little bit older, we had them for sports." (Interviewee 9).

"I think in Germany, like we are known for, or we have been known for, for like good quality products of being strict with the rules of production for example like for cars. And I think that based on that, for me quality of the product and what I buy, even if it's conscious or subconscious, is definitely important. So, I tried to buy things that I know that I'm going to get good quality." (Interviewee 10).

"*I expect the quality to be good because Finnish products are normally high quality."* (Interviewee 17).

"I feel that when I'm buying a something from a Finnish brand, I don't know if this might not be true, but it's like a smaller company, then I feel like it's more sustainable." (Interviewee 15).

"I don't like to buy things that were made in like Pakistan or Bangladesh or other things because I heard about the situation there, sometimes it's young children who work there and they are not really paid. There's a lot of exploitations of people. I also like to buy things that comes from like a sustainable cotton." (Interviewee 12).

"For me, generally fashion brands, are not really eco-friendly. If I want to buy some fashion clothes, I will first look at the label of the product then. If it's OK and the price is affordable, I will finish my buy." (Interviewee 1).

The COO effect was seen also for German consumers describing Marimekko's products. During the conversation about the expectations towards the quality of the co-brand, Marimekko was mentioned to be seen as a Nordic brand which are usually associated with quality and long lastingness. This association refers to the design and use of materials. The image was also seen increasing the sustainability of the brand. One of the interviewees mentioned that the buying behaviour would have an impact if the products would be produced in Finland or Germany. COO functions as a signal about the quality of the products.

"Also, I think that often the Nordic clothing brands have this. They take maybe more into account, like sustainability and materials and stuff like that's what I connect with the like Nordic clothing brands. So, I would trust them as well." (Interviewee 11).

"And I think even if they would say that our clothes are made in Finland or made in Germany, I think that would also like way more affect my buying behaviour in this way." (Interviewee 9).

4.2.2 Brand and product fit

Some of the interviewees considered the collaboration between the brands logical, but some did not see the logic behind it. Consistency and similarity of the brands in the co-brand were highlighted for the logicality. The logicality was generated through the brand images and associations of both brands. Some interviewees also highlighted sustainability in the brand fit and noted that Marimekko would improve Adidas' sustainable brand

image. High level of brand fit perceived by consumers will result in positive attitudes (Decker & Baade, 2016, p. 654). Some of the interviewees considered the product fit weak as they did not see the connection between the brands.

"I think brand collaboration in general cannot definitely be coherent because it could be the way to be creative, to promotion for the size of the firms. I think it could be the ways of promotion as well." (Interviewee 1).

"I think it makes a lot of sense, especially because Adidas is finding a lot of ways to be more sustainable. I think that partnering with a brand that already has an image of long lasting, strong reputation and something that's timeless, really positions Adidas into like a long-lasting vision. Plus, it's just very unique and it also has a lot of benefits for Marimekko just because like I don't think that they had any leisure wear before, it was mostly like more fancy things. So, I think this is just like a great way to expand their product offering in general." (Interviewee 5).

"Actually, I wouldn't say it's logical or when I first saw like ads about this online on social media, I was actually surprised that they do it with Adidas because I think for me, Marimekko was more like a designer brand, probably based on the quality and also that it's a bit pricier. So, I was surprised." (Interviewee 9).

"Yeah, I would say also that it's logical. Also surprising, because I remember when I first thought the collection, I was a bit surprised and happy that a Finnish company gets to do co-branding with like such a huge company like Adidas." (Interviewee 15).

The product fit between Adidas and Marimekko also received different opinions. Helmig et al. (2008, p. 367) described that co-brand is more successful if the product categories between the parent brands are constituent. The common opinion was that it's logical for Marimekko to design sports clothes with Adidas, but it would be illogical the other way; illogicality would be derived from Adidas designing designer clothing. Some also considered the product fit logical as they dissimilar in terms of the products since Marimekko lacks sports clothes in its product portfolio and Adidas specialises in them. Also, similarity regarding product portfolios as both brands operate in clothing industry generated positive reactions. Signaling theory suggests that high product fit can enhance the perceived quality of the co-branded products (Ma et al., 2018, p. 30).

"For me, it's still not consistent enough. I just don't see their like relationship between collaborating. But I'm also thinking about the H&M and collaborating with Karl Lagerfeld. They're not in the same product line as well, but they still collaborate because they have like positive impact for both. So maybe that's their reason for this collaborating as well." (Interviewee 2).

"The one thing that really like kept like catch my attention was this one dress. And there I really had the feeling, oh, this is really a Marimekko piece. But I think for the leggings, it was more like the sport stuff. I was like, OK, this is more Adidas. All in all, they had a really good mix of the product line. I would say for the co-operation of like a collaboration, it was pretty well done." (Interviewee 9).

"It was logical to take Marimekko's prints and colours and put them on the clothing of Adidas because Adidas can change the colours, but it would not really make sense to me in terms of the product if Adidas did like designer clothing that is not functional or for sports." (Interviewee 10).

"I will say that it is a good match, a bit like because Adidas is so huge brand. I'm not going to say that Marimekko is not but it's for sure, smaller brand and it's Finnish. So, it's a bit surprising that they are co-branding but at the same time they are both working in textile industry, like clothing so it's a great match." (Interviewee 16).

4.2.3 Sustainability

For all the groups, sustainability was considered as an important factor with purchase decisions in general. Factors of environmental, economic, and social dimensions play a significant importance these days for consumers (Kinnunen et al., 2022, p. 2). Some interviewees highlighted the importance of sustainability more than others, but all interviewees considered it as a factor at least to some extent. Especially in situations where two similar brands are considered, the sustainability is the factor that defines the final buying decision. It was highlighted that price is the most important factor when it comes to purchasing. Also, sustainability is a factor that many consumers would consider if the prices were low. Especially for students, solvency was regarded as an important factor in

considering whether to purchase sustainable products or not; many interviewees believed that they weren't ready to pay premium prices for sustainable products.

"For it's for me, I think that the brand name, the product and the carbon footprint of the product will mainly affect my buying decision." (Interviewee 1).

"It's definitely something I look at, but I mean at what cost is the same factor to like, I'm not going to pay a crazy premium, just cause it's sustainable. But if products are price similar and one I know is sustainable brand, I would probably definitely be choosing that over the others." (Interviewee 8).

"Of course, I would love to say that it does have an effect and it does, but not as big. Like, that's not the key factor because I'm a student I'm not yet in that position. I'm thinking it for sure but for example, if the price is 3 times more expensive, I'm might not be able to buy it at this point." (Interviewee 16).

The brand of Adidas was not generally considered rather sustainable based on the associations about its mass production. To some extent, the brand was seen as eco-friendly due to its use of recycled resources. The brand of Marimekko was associated as more sustainable, based on its products of long-lasting clothing. However, both brands are brands operating in fashion industry that are generally seen as non-sustainable as they increase the consumption of clothing, and these associations were transferred to the co-brand image. According to Elkinton (1998), sustainability has three main dimensions: economic, environmental, and social dimension. Environmental effects were considered as the most important factor in sustainability, but the social dimension was seen specifically significant with brands operating in fashion industry.

"For me, generally fashion brands are not really eco-friendly. If I want to buy some fashion clothes or pants, I will first look at the label of the product. Then if it's OK and the price is affordable, I will finish my buy." (Interviewee 1).

"Even though they're partnering with a company that is seen as a long-lasting brand, it's still adding to consumption. And so, like any big brand that's coming out with more, and the goal is for people to buy no matter what, that's going to be unsustainable. And

when you're at a scale that's that big, it doesn't matter how big you, how sustainable you are if you aren't addressing whole supply chain, especially transportation, there's like no way that you can say that you're a sustainable company." (Interviewee 5).

*"When I think about both brands, Marimekko and Adidas, I don't directly think about sustainability, but like if I take some time and think about it, I'm for sure, they're such well established companies, which we really trust in. So, I assume they probably act sustainable, but I, as I said, like for if I think about it at the first moment, I wouldn't directly think about sustainability at both of those brands." (*Interviewee 9).

There were conflicting opinions about the co-brand itself in terms of sustainability. These perceptions were formed based on the earlier associations about both companies. The large size of Adidas as a mass producer was associated with non-sustainable practices but Marimekko was seen as the brand involving more sustainable practices into the co-brand through its design. It emerged during the interviews that brand communication about the sustainability attributes regarding the co-brand should be clearer for consumers to see it as sustainable. In order to trustworthy communicate about the sustainability, brand should include some proofs about it in the brand communication.

"If would think at a first glance as a consumer, I would probably see it like more as Marimekko. And that is probably sustainable and that I would think Marimekko would probably be ensuring there's maybe some sustainable practises happening in the back end, but I guess the bigger company Adidas is probably manufacturing it and keeping to their practises when I would think about it more." (Interviewee 8).

"I think for me, I don't see a big factor in sustainability with this co-brand, at least with what I saw. I didn't see sustainability as a big standing out point." (Interviewee 10).

"I'm pretty sure that if companies do sustainable things, they communicate them because it's like a claim that gives you a positive reinforcement. Yeah, I wouldn't assume that they have some specific sustainable elements in this co-brand, because I think that they would communicate those in in the campaign or in the in the marketing of the close." (Interviewee 10).

Taking the perceptions of the co-brand into account, it was seen to be more beneficial for Adidas in terms of sustainability, and less beneficial for Marimekko. Adidas was considered as the brand whose operations can be rather unsustainable or not sustainable at all and Marimekko's involvement was seen as a positive factor regarding improving Adidas' sustainable brand. Some groups even perceived Marimekko's brand image less sustainable due to the co-brand with Adidas. These spillover effects enable brand attitudes towards the parent brands to be transformed through the attitudes towards the co-brand (Ma et al., 2018, p. 25). Therefore, groups that perceived the co-brand image as rather non-sustainable, perceptions were most importantly impacted by Adidas' brand image as a non-sustainable brand.

"I think maybe people would maybe start to think less of Marimekko because they're like partnering with Adidas and I don't know, it sounds like their sustainability practises aren't really known." (Interviewee 8).

"For me, I think it increased the sustainable sustainability image for Adidas. But the other way around, I think it remains similar level because it's already sustainable." (Interviewee 2).

"Clothes from Marimekko are like very long lasting. So, I would maybe say this co-brand would give a bit of a positive image on Adidas." (Interviewee 11).

"Well, I think they can learn from each other, and I think maybe like Marimekko can have a positive impact on Adidas. So maybe I think Marimekko can bring Adidas some experience on sustainability." (Interviewee 14).

"At the same time, I feel like because Marimekko is more local company and I have the image that Marimekko might be more sustainable than Adidas but when now the products are from Adidas, I feel that the sustainability is not in the same level as it would be if it would be only like Marimekko's products. I'm expecting the co-branded products to be as sustainable as Adidas' products." (Interviewee 15).

It was emerged during the interviews that the co-brand lacks brand communication in terms of sustainability that can be done through signaling related to the product attributes. The groups unanimously agreed that brand communication in terms of

sustainability will make a significant impact. Advertising, eco-labelling and detailed brand communications were noted as good ways for companies to communicate with consumers. According to a study conducted by Fatemi et al. (2023, p. 528), four major factors that affect how consumers perceive sustainable branded products are green brand equity, brand communication, product development and third-party labelling.

"I think brand communication is really important to let everyone know about the product, that they are really eco-friendly because like the advertisements so many brands do, the fact want to say they're an eco-friendly brand, so we need communication to let people know, we need proof and the number to know they are really eco-friendly." (Interviewee 4).

"*I think if they wanted to highlight the sustainable character of the co-brand, they should have also put it in the commercial because when people see it for the first time, you cannot assume that they know both of the brands, they just assume that they are sustainable. I mean, you don't always go on the website and check the details. So, in the common sense for me, I wouldn't connect with sustainability."* (Interviewee 10).

"I think the at the easiest way you're going to see it is from different kind of campaigns. So campaigns for sure, and usually some brands have some targets. And then from the tag, I check the materials." (Interviewee 16).

"I want to add that I use it when I want to make better choices, I check where the product is made. I feel that if it's like produced, for example in EU, it would be better because EU has like stricter guidelines, how to produce things and how to make the workers working conditions better, for example China or Pakistan." (Interviewee 15).

Greenwashing was noted as one of the factors affecting consumer perceptions, and it can be stated that disinformation regarding sustainability affects brand credibility and causes negative associations (Fatemi et al., 2023, p. 530). Surprisingly many interviewees considered greenwashing as an issue that had such a significant impact on the brand associations. Interviewees were concerned about the greenwashing especially regarding the fashion industry as it was stated being a common issue regarding the trustworthiness of marketing activities and branding. Interviewees considered the risk

of greenwashing decreasing if there were some proofs about the quality in terms of sustainability. Above-mentioned sustainability indicators such as eco-labels and certificates, would function as signals guaranteeing the quality thus increasing the consumer trust.

"There should be sustainability awareness labelling. There's a lot of you know, greenwashing. Everywhere you can look you see sustainability, but they're not. I would say I can't tell right now. I think that maybe what the collaboration can do more is to let that be the face of you know your prospective buyers, let us know that you're doing something extra, something beyond the other in terms of sustainability. (Interviewee 12).

"Brand communication is really important to let everyone know about the product, that they are really eco-friendly because like the advertisements, so many brands do, the fact want to say they're a eco-friendly brand, so we need communication to let people know, we need proof and the numbers to know they are really eco-friendly." (Interviewee 2).

Brand trust is an important factor as when it comes to the success of a brand. Trust is based on transparent performance and trustworthy communication (Brady, 2002, p. 288). In order to enable trust, brands should demonstrate how they are entitled to the commitments they are doing. Product attributes demonstrating sustainability that were pointed out during the interviews are for example sustainability labelling, product tags and marketing campaigns that function as signals proving quality. Through them, brands can for example communicate about the used materials and the country of origin that prove the quality for the consumer.

The key findings derived from the focus-group interviewees are summarized in Table 6. The table 6 includes main findings of attitudes of Adidas and Marimekko, the perceived fit in terms of brands and products, spillover effects, country-of-origin effect, sustainable attributes, brand communication regarding sustainability as well as the overall evaluation of the co-brand in terms of the sustainability.

Table 6: Key findings derived from the focus-group interviews.

	Group 1	**Group 2**	**Group 3**	**Group 4**	**Group 5**
Attitudes towards Adidas	Sporty, simple, plain, functional.	Quality, sporty, innovative.	Sporty, functional, less elegant.	Sporty, worldwide.	Huge, sporty.
Attitudes towards Marimekko	Unique, fashionable, luxurious.	Colourful, playful.	Timeless, modern, eye-catching.	Colourful, bold, nature.	Sustainable, quality, Finnish.
Perceived brand fit	Illogical, connection between the brands is lacking.	Logical, brands are complemental.	Illogical, connection between the brands is lacking.	Logical, brands are complemental.	Logical, brands are complemental.
Perceived product fit	Illogical, products categories are incompatible.	Logical, product categories are compatible.	Logical, product categories are compatible.	Logical, product categories are compatible.	Logical, product categories are compatible.
Spillover effects	Sustainability of Adidas increased.	Sustainability of Adidas increased.	Sustainability of Adidas increased.	Sustainability of Adidas increased.	No significant effect.
COO effect	Country of production and where the materials are produced guarantee quality.	No significant effect.	Origin of Germany and Finland provide guarantee about quality.	Country of production and where the materials are produced guarantee quality.	Origin of Finland provides a guarantee about quality.

Sustainable attributes	Rather non-sustainable.	Rather non-sustainable.	Rather non-sustainable.	Rather non-sustainable.	Rather non-sustainable.
Communication	Lacks communication about sustainability.	Lacks communication about sustainability.	Lacks communication about sustainability.	Lacks communication about sustainability.	Lacks communication about sustainability.
Overall evaluation of the international co-brand	Somewhat sustainable. Mainly affected by associations of fashion industry's non-sustainability. Marimekko was seen sustainable and Adidas to some extent.	Non-sustainable. Mainly affected by associations of fashion industry's non-sustainability.	Non-sustainable. Mainly affected by associations of Adidas' image as a non-sustainable mass producer.	Somewhat sustainable. Mainly affected by associations of fashion industry's non-sustainability. Marimekko was seen sustainable and Adidas to some extent.	Non-sustainable. Brand image did not change through the co-brand.

5 Discussion

In this section, the findings of this research will be discussed, and the existing literature will be applied to the empirical findings. A revised theoretical framework will be also introduced.

This thesis increases the understanding of the factors that affect consumers' evaluations in terms of sustainability in an international co-brand. The thesis provides a review of the existing theories in co-branding, sustainable branding and consumer evaluations allowing for a better understanding of how organizations can benefit from international co-branding, how to build a sustainable brand and how consumers perceive them and what influences the attitudes.

Two main research objectives guided the research. **Objective 1** – *to define the ways how international companies can build their sustainable brand by using co-branding as a strategy* is answered in the chapters 2.1-2.1.3. These chapters provide a comprehensive understanding of international co-branding and how do consumer evaluations are formed. **Objective 2** – *to clarify the process of how international consumers evaluate international sustainable brands by analysing the factors that affect them* is answered in chapters 2.2 – 2.2.2 in which sustainability as well as sustainable branding model will be introduced. The following chapter analyses the most essential findings of this research more in depth.

5.1 Revised theoretical framework

The main factors affecting the consumer evaluations on sustainable brands of international co-brands are illustrated in figure 7. This revised model of the theoretical framework demonstrates the most important factors that were emerged during the focus-group interviews.

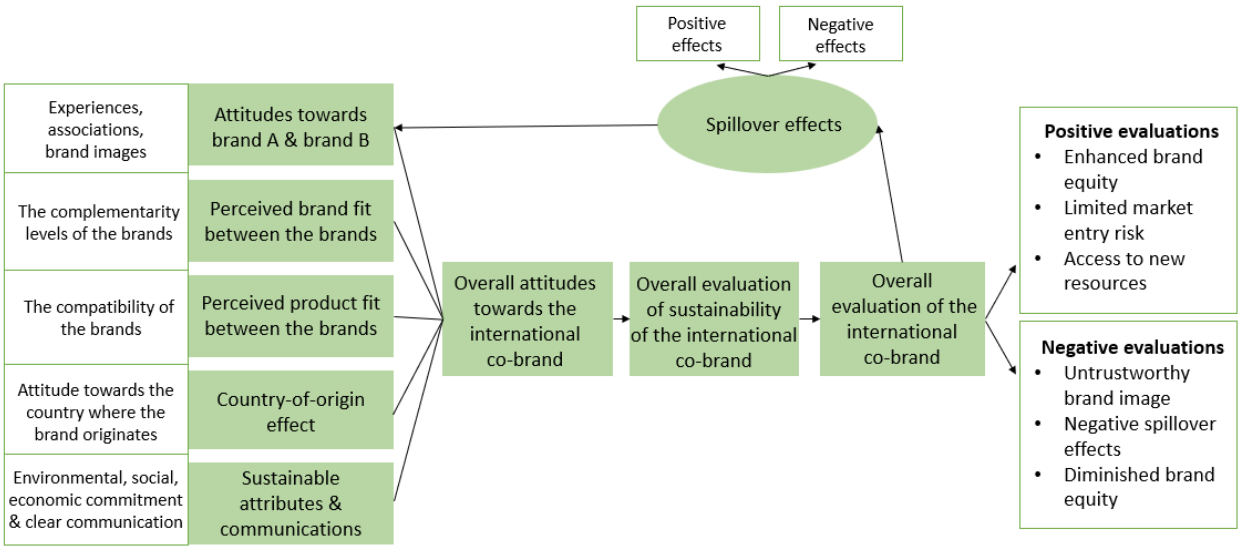

Figure 5: The revised theoretical framework.

According to the revised theoretical framework of this thesis, the overall evaluation of the co-brand and its sustainable brand image is affected by various factors (Figure 7). Existing attitudes towards both parent brands that form the co-brand play a crucial role in the way how consumers perceive the co-brand itself. Consumers form attitudes towards each brand and these attitudes are based on the earlier knowledge and experiences of the brand and these attitudes are associated with the co-brand. Adidas' brand image was mostly associated with being a global sports brand with a huge market size. Some interviewees, especially German interviewees, considered Adidas also trustworthy brand regarding the products. Marimekko's brand was seen as a colourful and playful, and their products were associated with long-lasting designer clothes. Some interviewees considered Marimekko a pricier brand, forming an image of luxury. Marimekko was associated with long lastingness deriving from its smaller size, thus enabling an image of more detailed products that signal about quality.

5.2 Essential findings

Interestingly, the country-of-origin effect was clearly seen for Finnish, German, Asian and African consumers as the brand image signals about quality based on the earlier experiences and the general brand images. For the German interviewees, Adidas was automatically associated with quality deriving from the German origin. Similarly, Finnish consumers automatically associated Marimekko with quality and the brand's origin as a Finnish brand. Both Asian and African consumers considered the country-of-production and the country-of-origin of the materials an important factor regarding sustainability. COO was considered as the factor that guarantees the quality and sustainability of the product.

The attitudes affect the way how consumers see the international co-brand, and the attitudes towards parent brands can also transform through the international co-brand through the spillover effects that play an important role in co-branding. In this study, the overall image of Adidas was seen as improved in terms of its sustainability. This improvement was affected by Marimekko's slightly more sustainable brand image that was perceived by the consumers. Main reasons derive from the image of long-lasting products and better attributes related to production such as materials and detailing. On the contrary, Marimekko's sustainable brand image was even negatively affected by the co-brand with Adidas due to its brand image of being a global mass producer that has a large, negative environmental and social affect. Therefore, Adidas was seen as the brand that benefits more of this international co-brand.

Most interviewees considered the international co-brand as surprising yet positive and logical collaboration, deriving from Marimekko's size as being a smaller Finnish brand compared to Adidas' global market size. However, some interviewees considered the brand fit confusing, as the international co-brand was lacking the connection of the brands. The product fit on the other hand evoked positive feelings in interviewees since their product categories are similar as both operate in the fashion industry. Marimekko was mentioned to miss sport clothing which was seen as a positive thing. For some interviewees, the international co-brand was associated more about Adidas' brand rather

than being equally about both brands. General impression was that the international co-brand is Marimekko's patterns in Adidas' products resulting an association of the quality of Adidas' products. It was emerged that consumers would not expect the quality to be as good as Marimekko's general level of quality and instead, they would expect it to be at the level of Adidas' products. Therefore, Adidas' products are seen as deteriorate compared to Marimekko's in terms of the product quality.

Sustainability is one of the main focuses of this thesis. The overall sustainability of the international brand is formed through the sustainability attributes and the brand's communication about them. These attributes can be economic, social, and/or environmental dimensions. Adidas was seen as rather a non-sustainable or sustainable only to some extent based on the perceptions of its social and environmental dimensions. The role of Adidas being a huge, global mass producer was seen to be the most significant reason for the image. Some interviewees saw positive connection between the use of recycled resources to the sustainable brand image. Marimekko was seen as more sustainable compared to Adidas, based on the image of its long-lasting and more unique pieces of clothing which were seen as signals of quality.

Sustainability in general was considered as an important factor in buying behaviour, at least to some extent. Price was considered as the main factor affecting whether to buy sustainable products or not. Some interviewees considered price over sustainability, but it was a crucial factor for all the interviewees, especially in situations when two similar brands are considered, and sustainability is the factor that differentiates the brands from each other. Other important factors were product quality and attributes. However, sustainability was considered as a factor for many if the income level would be high; many considered that being a student affects negatively to the ability to choose sustainable options.

Deriving from these associations, this specific international co-brand was seen as rather non-sustainable. The association of Adidas being a mass producer in the industry was

considered surprisingly as the most significant effect for this evaluation. Most interviewees considered especially the fashion industry non-sustainable, as the production of clothing will have a large environmental and social impact. Interviewees considered that the main target of this international co-brand is not to build the sustainable brand, even though the collection is partly made of recycled materials that functions as one sustainable product attribute.

The international co-brand was seen to lack signaling about the sustainability. In order to promote and build the sustainable brand, the communication of the co-brand should be consistent and clearer about the sustainability attributes, such as the targets and materials that create the image of a sustainable brand. Preferred ways were brand communication, advertisement, eco-labels, and certificates related to sustainability. These brand communication ways function as proofs about the sustainability that results in quality though the signaling effect. However, some interviewees are also sceptical about fashion industry in terms of sustainability, as there are various forms of greenwashing. Some interviewees also associated the co-brand with greenwashing deriving from the mass production of clothing of Adidas.

6 Conclusions

In this section, the theoretical contribution of this thesis, managerial implications as well as the limitations of this research, and recommendations for the future research will be concluded.

6.1 Theoretical contribution

This chapter includes the theoretical contribution of the thesis. The theoretical contribution of this thesis advances the existing academic theories in various fields of branding. The core idea of this thesis was to define which factors affect consumer evaluations in terms of sustainability in international co-brands. The theoretical framework is based on the current state of the literature of co-branding, sustainability, sustainable branding, and consumer evaluation formation (Dickinson & Barker, 2006; Keller, 1993; Winit et al., 2023). The current state of the literature of sustainable branding is rather limited, especially in international co-branding context, thus this thesis brings insights into this new state of research. The revised theoretical framework of this study also brings together various factors in international environment that affect how consumer see international co-brands, the reasons behind choosing co-branding as a strategy as well as how are international sustainable brands formed.

The most essential factors affecting the overall consumer evaluations of international co-brands in terms of the sustainability are attitudes towards the brand A and B that form the co-brand, the perceived fit in terms of products and the brands, spillover effects, country-of-origin effect as well as the sustainable attributes and communication about them. This supports the existing theories and literature conducted by Keller (1993), Simonin & Ruth (1998), Rao et al. (1999), Dickinson & Barker (2006), Besharat & Langan (2013), Paydas Turan (2021) and Winit et al. (2023). Particularly, this thesis supports the existing theory according to which the earlier attitudes affect the perceptions towards the international co-brand (Parment et al., 2016). The attitudes deriving from the co-

brand can change attitudes towards the individual brands through the spillover effects. The attitudes are also affected by the country-of-origin effect that influences the perceptions of quality as the origin of the brand functions as a signal (Witek-Hajduk & Grudecka, 2023). As the topic is analysed in international context, consumer evaluations are affected in addition to country-of-origin image by cultural differences. The literature review of this thesis also includes a model by Hofstede (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2010) according to which culture can be divided into five different dimensions. Signaling theory plays an important role in the perceptions of the co-brand, as the product attributes function as signals about the quality of the products (Rao et al., 1999). This is also important with sustainability as brands need to have sustainable attributes in order to guarantee the quality of them and this can be done with brand communication (Kumar & Christodoulopoulou, 2014).

The literature review and theoretical findings increase the understanding of the importance of sustainability and co-branding and help to form a comprehensive understanding of the current state of the research. The findings of the study support the rising importance of sustainability and introduce the reasons behind companies branding themselves as sustainable. This thesis intertwines co-branding theory into sustainable branding and proposes a theoretical framework which highlights the most significant factors.

6.2 Managerial implications

This chapter covers the topic of managerial implications. This thesis increases the understanding in the topics of international co-branding, sustainable branding and how do consumers form their evaluations regarding co-brands. The importance of new branding strategies as well as involving sustainability as a part of the brand has increased a lot during last decades. This thesis offers concrete examples of how co-branding can be used as a branding strategy in international markets, how sustainable brands are formed through them, and how do consumers perceive and evaluate them. The theoretical

framework of the thesis can be used as a tool to illustrate the most significant factors that affect the sustainable brands through international co-brands and how consumers perceive them. Particularly managers should carefully consider the brand fit, product fit, the country-or-origin, the brand images of the parent brands as well as the sustainable attributes and communication when designing international co-brands as they have an effect on the overall outcomes.

The results of the group interviews can be utilized to understand the main factors that affect the evaluations of consumers regarding sustainable brands that are formed through co-brands in international markets. The main managerial implication is that this thesis offers an opportunity for understanding how sustainable brands are formed through international co-brands and this is a topic that has remained so far without further research. Sustainability is an increasingly important factor for businesses these days, and companies should focus on building their sustainable brand in order to manage the competition in the market. Consumers need proofs about the quality of the products in terms of the sustainability, and this should be done without affecting the brand image negatively through greenwashing.

6.3 Limitations and propositions for future research

This chapter includes the limitations and future research avenues of this thesis. This study has some limitations that should be considered when reflecting the study findings, and the study results must be interpreted with caution. A case study was conducted for five different focus-groups involving consumers from different cultures. The most important limitation regarding this study is that it is based on a single case co-brand, Adidas x Marimekko. The results of this qualitative research thus cannot certainly be generalized to larger audiences as they are based on the evaluations of 18 consumers about the case co-brand. The results have been influenced by the case co-brand which was investigated in terms of its industry, market size and target audience resulting in outcomes that cannot be generalized as such for different co-brands.

The second limitation regarding this study is the scarcity of existing branding models that include sustainable branding into the existing co-branding models. The current research sets comprehensive models of the use of international co-branding as a strategy but remains lacking the connection between sustainability elements and the co-branding strategy. Sustainable branding is quite a new concept among the branding literature; however, it is becoming even more emphasized factor in today's business. This makes it an important focus in the branding literature that requires further investigation, thus offering a possible research area for the future.

Proposing approaches for future research, sustainable branding requires more empirical emphasis due to its novelty as being an essential element in branding. This research is limited to a single co-brand, providing possibilities to focus on sustainable branding of international co-brands through numerous collaborations across different industries. As this study focuses on consumer evaluations, it also provides a possibility for further research also regarding different aspects, for example focusing on the topic from the parent brands' aspect. Sustainability itself is a multidimensional construct that offers a possibility for future research to focus only on one of the key dimensions: economic, social, or environmental sustainability rather than comprehensively investigating it as a whole through all its dimensions. As this thesis touched the topic of purchase intentions regarding sustainable brands, there could be an interesting focus of research in analysing this topic more in depth in terms of the factors affecting the buying behaviour. Overall, the research of sustainable branding through international co-brands remains scarce, thus more research is needed in order for companies to fully manage them.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview guide.

General questions before the material in order to investigate the general impression of the brands:

1. Is the brand Marimekko familiar to you?
2. Is the brand Adidas familiar to you?
3. Have you bought something from Marimekko and/or Adidas? What did you buy?

At this part, first some photos of Marimekko and Adidas are shown. After individually introducing the brands, photos of the collaboration Adidas x Marimekko are shown.

Questions about consumer evaluations:

4. How would you describe the brand of Marimekko? Why did you decide to choose these words?
    a) If you do not know Marimekko in advance, how would you describe it based on the first impressions from looking at the photos?
5. How would you describe the brand of Adidas? Why did you decide to choose these words?
    a) If you do not know Adidas in advance, how would you describe it based on the first impressions from looking at the photos?
6. How would you describe this co-brand?
    a) Do you think that your earlier perceptions of another company are likely to affect the collaboration and the products? Would you describe it similarly as Marimekko's/Adidas' brands?
7. How would you describe the product quality of the co-brand? Why? What provides the guarantee?
8. Do you think that your own cultural background affects your evaluations and purchase choices as a consumer? In which ways?

Questions about the brand and product fit of the brands:

9. How would you describe the brand match between Marimekko and Adidas? Do you think the collaboration is consistent? How about logical?
    a. What elements affect it?
10. Do you think that the co-operation between the brands is logical in terms of their products? What elements affect it?
11. What do you think are the benefits for the companies that derive from the co-brand?

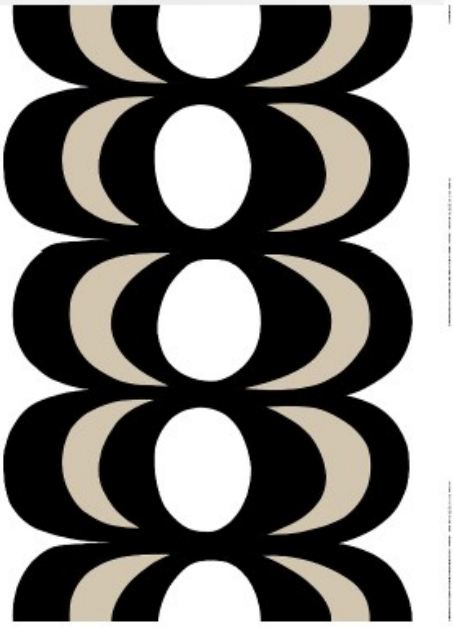
Questions about the sustainability of the brands and the co-brand:

12. How important factor is sustainability to you when you compare brands in general? Describe the most important factors.
13. Do you think that sustainability will affect your purchase intention of Adidas' or Marimekko's products? What about the co-branded products?
14. Describe the sustainability of the brands if you think about them individually. How about the sustainability of the co-brand in general?
    a) What elements are likely to increase the sustainability?
15. Describe the sustainability of the co-branded products. What affects the sustainability?
16. Do you think that this co-operation will strengthen the image of the overall sustainability of the brands?
17. There is a detailed introduction about the sustainability of the collaboration. Describe if communicating about the collaboration will help you form the sustainable brand image?

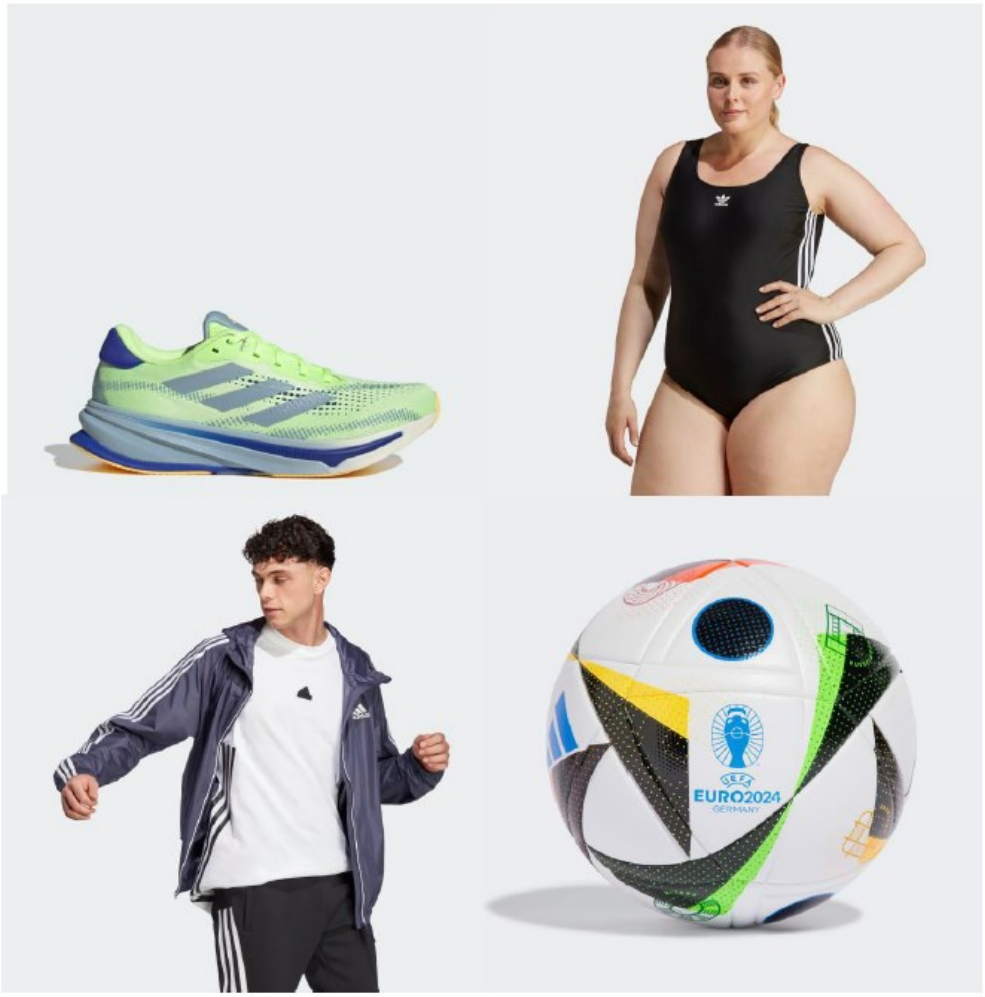
Appendix 2. The materials shown in the group interviews.

Adidas x Marimekko collaboration video:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIoSNBXJEqM

Photos of Marimekko.



Photos of Adidas.



Photos of Adidas x Marimekko.