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# From Greenwashing to Green Trust: marketing strategies for sustainable brand communication in Fashion

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## Abstract

As sustainability gains relevance in consumer decision-making, brands increasingly adopt environmental narratives to engage conscious audiences. However, the prevalence of greenwashing, misleading or exaggerated claims about environmental practices, has raised concerns about credibility, particularly in the fashion industry. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature by conducting a systematic review of the literature and proposing a framework that highlights the interrelationship between consumer involvement, authenticity, and ethical communication. A structured literature review was conducted using the Web of Science (WoS) database, resulting in the selection and analysis of 15 peer-reviewed articles. These were categorized into three thematic clusters: perceptions of authentic sustainability, sustainable authenticity in luxury branding, and ethics and consumer engagement. Findings reveal that trust is not built solely through sustainability claims, but through consistent, transparent, and ethically grounded communication. Younger consumers, especially, display high sensitivity to inconsistencies between brand discourse and action. The study proposes an integrative framework that positions ethics and consumer engagement as central mediators in the construction of green trust. This framework highlights the need for brands to move from performative declarations to participatory and value-driven narratives, in which consumers co-create meaning and legitimacy. The research contributes to current literature by synthesizing diverse perspectives on sustainable branding and offering strategic guidelines to help brands distinguish themselves from greenwashing practices and build enduring trust.

**Keywords:** Greenwashing; Sustainability; Consumer trust; Ethical communication; Fashion marketing

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As environmental and social concerns gain relevance, brands have increasingly embraced the language of sustainability to appeal to conscious consumers. However, this discourse shift has not always been accompanied by genuine structural change. On the contrary, the prevalence of greenwashing, misleading claims about environmental practices, has raised significant concerns regarding brand credibility and consumer trust.

The fashion industry has emerged as a critical arena for this tension. Characterized by high visibility and growing scrutiny, it frequently showcases both authentic sustainability affords and opportunistic green narratives (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2022). The result is a complex landscape where consumers must navigate a flood of sustainability claims, often without clear criteria to distinguish between commitment and convenience (Sailer et al., 2022; Timmons et al., 2024). As studies suggest, this ambiguity can lead to distrust (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022), anti-consumerist (Garcia-Ortega et al., 2023), and scepticism (Timmons et al., 2024), especially among younger and more critical audiences (Taufique & Islam, 2020).

Although various studies have addressed isolated dimensions of this phenomenon, from perceptions of authenticity (Fang, 2024) to the role of ethics and luxury brands (Arantes & Barbosa Costa, 2024), there is still a lack of integrative models that clarify how marketing can actively build trust in sustainable brand communication (Fuxman et al., 2022; Winit et al., 2023). The only systematic literature review (SLR) included in our sample (Badhwar et al., 2024), offers a comprehensive analysis of greenwashing practices in the fashion and textile industry, based on 103 articles published between 2000 and 2023. The authors analyse both direct and indirect manifestations of greenwashing, as well as vicarious forms, exploring their impact on consumer behaviour and throughout the value chain. The study identifies gaps between the intentions communicated by brands and consumer perceptions, highlighting the urgent need for stricter regulation and greater transparency in business practices. In addition, recommendations are proposed to mitigate the phenomenon, reinforcing the role of environmental literacy and institutional vigilance in combating green misinformation.

Beyond recent contributions on greenwashing and trust, this study is also informed by foundational perspectives that have shaped the theoretical understanding of trust, sustainability, and communications.

Trust is understood as a construct built on perceptions of competence, integrity, and benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995), and as a core dimension in the development of long-term, committed relationships between organisations and stakeholders (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Rousseau et al., 1998). In marketing contexts, trust also reflects the perceived credibility and reliability of brand messages (Ganesan, 1994).

The concept of sustainability is anchored in the idea of balancing present and future needs (WCED, 1987), and in the articulation of economic, social, and environmental dimensions through the triple bottom line approaches (Kozulj, 2011). Communication is here considered not only as a transmission of messages, but as a co-considered and dialogical process (Habermas, 1984), where authenticity and reciprocity are key to fostering legitimacy and trust (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Suchman, 1995).

These theoretical perspectives provide a robust framework for analysing the conditions under which sustainable brand communication can effectively foster trust and mitigate the risks associated with greenwashing.

In this context, the present study aims to fill the gap in the literature by conducting a systematic review of the literature and proposing a framework that highlights the interrelationship between consumer involvement, authenticity, and ethical communication.

This study is guided by two central research questions (RQ):

**RQ 1:** How can marketing foster trust in sustainable brands?

**RQ 2:** What strategies help consumers distinguish between authentic sustainability and greenwashing?

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To address these questions, was conducted a SLR and analysed fifteen relevant studies, which were grouped into three thematic clusters.

This study is structured as follows. After this introduction, the methodology outlines the criteria and process used in the structured literature review. The results section presented both descriptive insights and thematic clusters emerging from the selected articles. Next, a framework is proposed to integrate the findings and illustrate how trust in sustainable brand communication can be built. Finally, the conclusions reflect on the main contribution of the study and suggest directions for future research and practice.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

To better understand how marketing practices can foster trust in sustainable brands' communication, particularly in distinguishing genuine sustainability efforts from greenwashing, an SLR was conducted. The process followed is illustrated in Figure 1, which outlines the main steps taken in the review, from search and selection to thematic synthesis and framework development.

The initial search was carried out using the WoS database, using a combination of keywords focused on the intersection between marketing and sustainability: ("greenwashing" AND marketing) OR "sustainable branding" AND fashion.

To ensure methodological integrity, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) articles published until May 1<sup>st</sup>; (2) language restricted to English; and (3) document types limited to research articles, review articles, and early access. Conversely, the exclusion criteria eliminated non-reviewed documents, conference abstracts, editorials, and book chapters.

The search yielded 17 articles, which were subjected to a two-step screening process. First, titles and abstracts were reviewed to eliminate misaligned studies. Second, full-text readings were selected to ensure conceptual alignment. After this process, 15 articles were retained for detailed analysis.

Each selected article was manually coded using a structured template that included the authorship, publication year, research objectives, methodological approach, type of data, theoretical framing, and key findings. Through a combination of open and axial coding, the studies were then categorized into their thematic clusters: (i) perception of authentic sustainability, (ii) sustainable authenticity in luxury brands, and (iii) ethics and consumer engagement. These categories emerged through pattern recognition of analytical focus and conceptual intersections across the literature.

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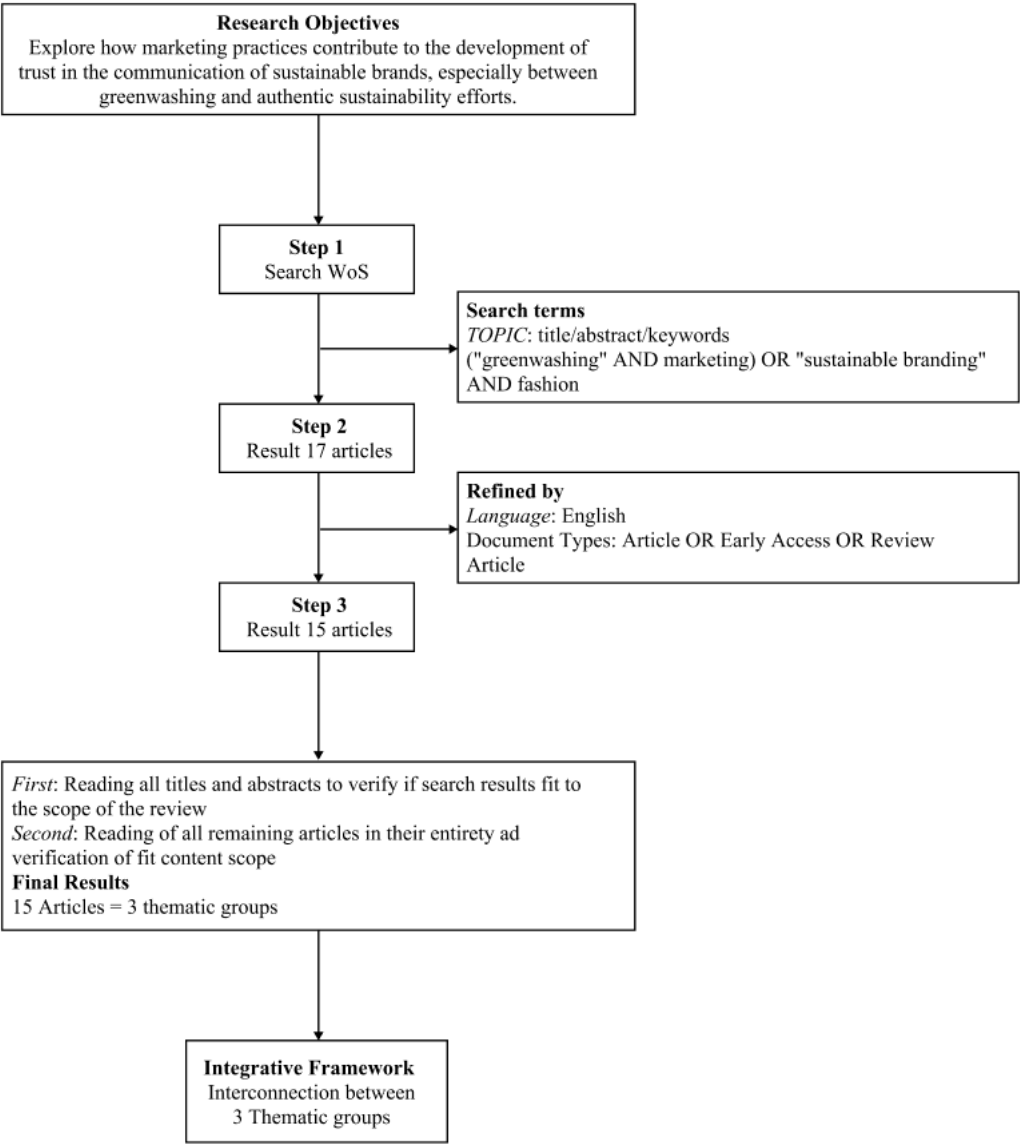


Figure 1 – Methodological flow of the literature review process

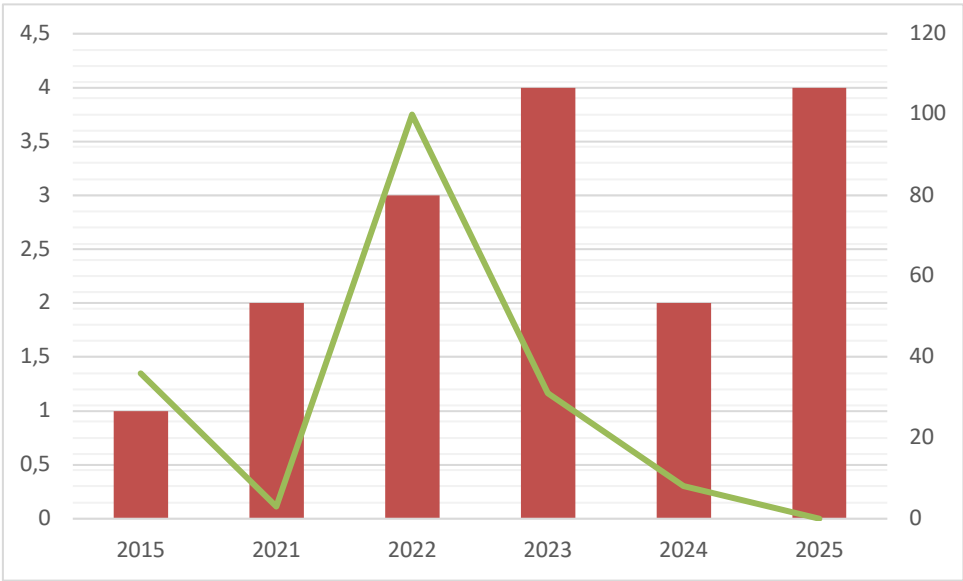
Source: Authors

3. RESULTS

3.1. DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

As figure 2 shows, the period between 2021 and 2022 was marked by significant growth, then stabilized in 2023 and returned to that level in 2025.

Figure 2 – Evolution of publications and citations



Source: Authors

After a modest start in 2015, there were no publications in the following years until 2021, when there was a slight drop. From 2022 onwards, there was a sharp rise, with the number of citations peaking that year, signalling an increase in interest and academic impact on the subject. In contrast, the number of articles published rose until 2023, fell in 2024, and rose again in 2025, equalling the volume of publications in 2023. The lack of citations this year can be explained by its proximity in time, which has not allowed the accumulation of measurable impact.

Table 1 summarizes the five most cited articles in the sample, revealing two predominant areas: sustainable marketing and consumer behaviour. The articles by (Sailer et al., 2022) and (D’Souza et al., 2015), both focused on sustainable marketing, ranked first in terms of number of citations. The studies by (Lu et al., 2022) and Policarpo et al. (2023) stand out for their focus on consumer behaviour, based on quantitative data. The article by Eppinger (2022) presents a more diverse methodological approach, combining a literature review, case study, and interviews, which demonstrates the growing appreciation of qualitative methods.

Table 1 – Characterization of the five most cited articles

Author(s)/ Year	Journal	Times Cited, WoS Core	Data type	Research area
(Sailer et al., 2022)	Sustainability	38	content analysis + survey	Sustainable marketing
(D’Souza et al., 2015)	International Journal of Consumer Studies	36	Survey	Sustainable marketing
(Lu et al., 2022)	Sustainability	31	Survey	Consumer Behaviour
(Eppinger, 2022)	Sustainability- Science Practice and Policy	31	literature review + case studies + interviews	Sustainability

(Policarpo et al., 2023)	International Journal of Consumer Studies	15	Survey	Consumer Behaviour
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Source: Author

The journal Sustainability is the most representative, with three articles on the list, reflecting its centrality in publishing research on sustainability in marketing and consumer behaviour. This set of studies highlights the relevance of empirical methodologies, and the attention paid to consumer perceptions of brands' sustainability practices.

3.2. THEMATIC CLUSTER

After analyzing the full texts, the 15 articles selected were organized into three thematic clusters, allowing us to draw lines of meaning that help us understand the main approaches to communicating sustainability in marketing.

The categorization shown in Table 2 resulted from a reading of the predominant analytical focuses in each article, allowing us to identify common trends, points of convergence, and gaps. Each cluster reflects a specific dimension, from perception of authenticity, through the role of luxury brands, to ethical implications and consumer involvement. Although distinct, these axes intersect at various points, revealing the complexity and density of the current debate around greenwashing and building trust in sustainable brands.

Table 2 – Name and distribution of articles by cluster

Clusters	Authors
Cluster 1 (n=9): Perceptions of authentic sustainability	(D’Souza et al., 2015; Ende et al., 2023; Li et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2022; Marko & Kusá, 2023; Policarpo et al., 2023; Sailer et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2025)
Cluster 2 (n=2): Sustainable authenticity in luxury	(Brandão & Magalhães, 2023; Silva et al., 2025)
Cluster 3 (n=4): Ethics and consumer engagement	(Badhwar et al., 2024; Eppinger, 2022; Gutiérrez-Torrenova, 2021; Perry et al., 2025)

Source: Author

Each of the clusters is analyzed in greater detail below, highlighting the theoretical and empirical contributions of each set of studies.

3.2.1. PERCEPTIONS OF AUTHENTIC SUSTAINABILITY

As environmental consciousness grows, consumers become more demanding and attentive to brand practices. However, this attention has revealed a latent tension: on the one hand, companies try to respond to market demands with “green” speeches; on the other, these promises often don’t translate into concrete actions (Li et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2025). When this happens, the effects are clear: loss of credibility, a drop in purchase intention, and erosion of perceived value.

This effect is even more pronounced among younger consumers, who are often more informed and critical and show sensitivity to inconsistencies between and show sensitivity to inconsistencies between what brands say and what they do (Lu et al., 2022). In the case of campaigns such as black Friday, some strategies resort to both greenwashing and bluewashing, to symbolically appropriate social and environmental causes, a practice that, according to the authors, raises serious doubts about the authenticity of the corporate commitment to sustainability (Sailer et al., 2022).

On the other hand, some studies go beyond criticism, offering clues as to how brands can cultivate more genuine relationships with their audience. One of these paths involves values-oriented communication and the ability to generate identification, factors that positively influence, for example, the willingness to share content related to sustainable fashion (Yang et al., 2024). Adherence to sustainable fashion isn't just about eye-catching campaigns, it's often shaped by deep-seated beliefs and critical attitudes. When a cynical view of the role of companies in society prevails, green messages are viewed with suspicion. In this scenario, greenwashing not only undermines trust but also makes it even more difficult to distinguish who is committed to sustainability (Policarpo et al., 2023).

This challenge is compounded by the weakness of education for conscious consumption. In a context where environmental literacy is lacking, consumers have fewer tools to assess the veracity of the claims made by brands. And this is precisely where greenwashing finds fertile ground, taking advantage of the absence of critical thinking and the difficulty in scrutinizing what lies beyond the discourse (Marko & Kusá, 2023).

It is also important to recognize that not all sustainable messages are received in the same way. The type of product and the company's reputation play a crucial role. Brands with a questionable track record or operating in sectors where the link to sustainability is not obvious face greater scepticism, even if their practices are legitimate (Ende et al., 2023). Trust, in these cases, is not earned with words: it requires time, consistency, and concrete evidence.

Another critical point is how certain audiences continue to be ignored. For too long, communication about sustainable fashion has had a highly segmented profile, almost always aimed at women. However, there are more men interested in ecological options, aware of their choices, and willing to consume more consciously. Integrating this segment, without falling into stereotype, represents an opportunity to make sustainability truly inclusive (D'Souza et al., 2015).

### **3.2.2. SUSTAINABLE AUTHENTICITY IN LUXURY**

Cluster two delves into how innovation in services, sustainability, and communication are intertwined in the world of luxury brands. In this context, it is not enough to adopt sustainable practices, they must be communicated authentically. When consumers are motivated by environmental consciousness and personal well-being, they are particularly driven. Authenticity, in these cases, is not only desirable but also critical to establishing relationships of trust and nurturing a lasting emotional connection (Brandão & Magalhães, 2023).

But there is a downside. When sustainable discourse is not accompanied by concrete actions, dissonance arises, which erodes the brand's credibility. Practices such as greenwashing not only jeopardize corporate identity but also reputational capital, especially when ESG commitments are part of the institutional promise (Silva et al., 2025).

### **3.2.3. ETHICS AND CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT**

Consumers are playing an increasingly active role in building sustainable value, with a particular focus on social media and the way brands communicate their commitments. In turn, the opportunistic use of environmental discourse by some brands can undermine consumers' confidence (Badhwar et al., 2024). When "green" marketing becomes just window dressing, the result is misinformation and growing scepticism.

Production, communication, and consumption are not treated as separate spheres, but as interconnected parts of an ethical chain. Consumers, in this scenario, are not just influenced; they are also influencers, capable of putting pressure on brands to align discourse and practice. Authenticity thus ceases to be an extra and it becomes a decision criterion (Perry et al., 2025).

Sustainability is ceasing to be a mere reputational argument and is becoming a structuring principle of the economic systems themselves. Investors and consumers are increasingly demanding transparency, accountability, and alignment with ESG values, which is forcing institutions to rethink not only what they do but above all how they communicate it (Gutiérrez-Torrenova, 2021).

Finally, it's important to reflect on the role of recycling in the textile sector, because sustainable choices don't just depend on the existence of technological solutions. The success of these practices is closely linked to the



way they are communicated. When information is clear, accessible, and credible, consumers tend to become more actively involved (Badhwar et al., 2024; Eppinger, 2022; Gutiérrez-Torrenova, 2021; Perry et al., 2025). That’s the key point: sustainability only gains traction when it is accompanied by a discourse that informs, mobilizes, and generates trust.

4. FRAMEWORK

Drawing from the three thematic clusters, we propose an integrative framework that seeks to capture the dynamic and layered nature of sustainable brand communication. Rather than presenting these clusters as isolated domains, the model emphasizes how they intersect with one another and converge in a broader reflection on authenticity and trust.

As we can see in Figure 3, at the centre of this framework lies the mediating role of ethics and consumer engagement. Not merely a bridge between theory and practice, this central axis reflects the growing recognition that sustainability is not something brands can declare; it is something they must prove, earn, and continuously nurture. When consumers take on more active roles, questioning, co-creating, and holding brands accountable, the conversation shifts from passive reception to active participation. Ethics, in this context, emerges not as an abstract principle but as a lived expectation, shaping the credibility of both messages and messengers.

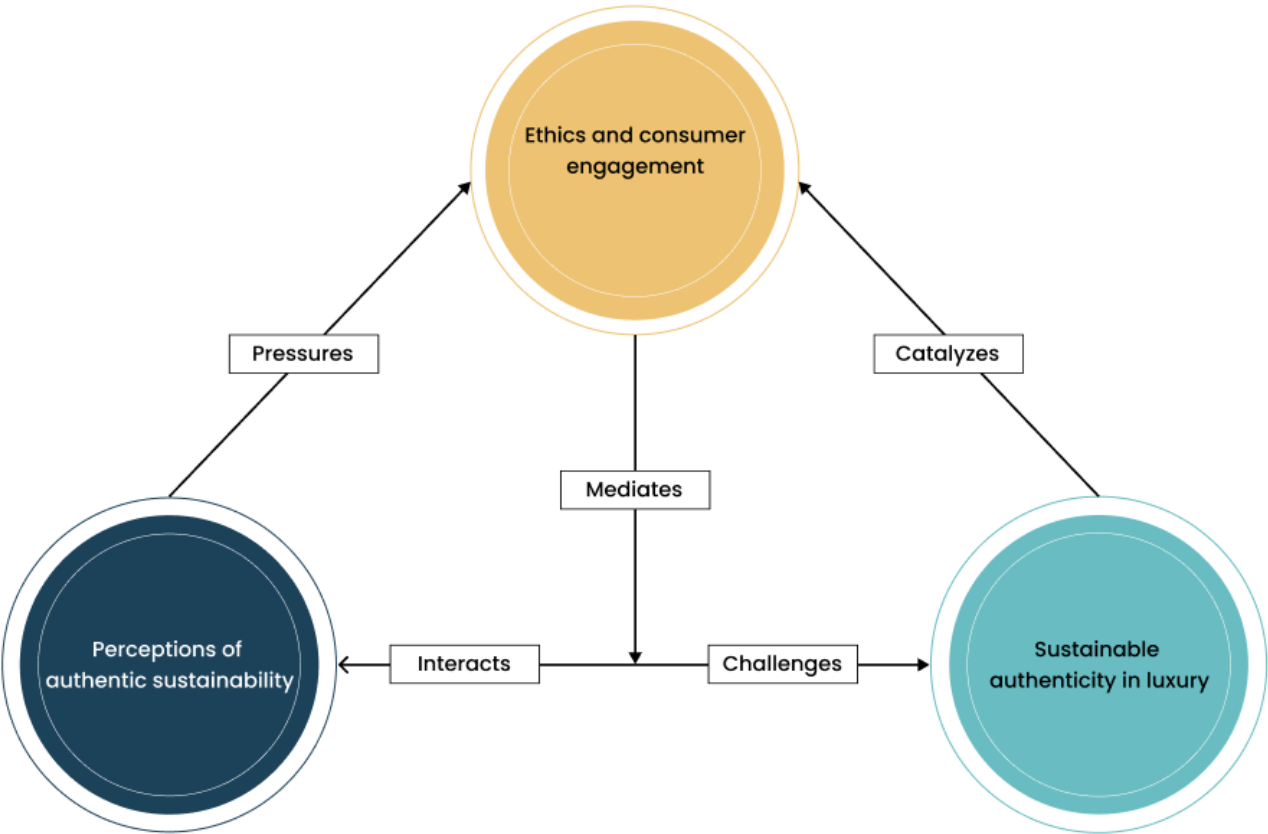


Figure 3 – Relationship between thematic clusters and the transversal role of greenwashing

Source: Sources

The intersection between the first two clusters reveals tensions that are particularly visible in sectors such as fashion. Consumers are increasingly attuned to inconsistencies between what brands say and what they do, especially in the cases of luxury brands, where sustainability claims often clash with long-standing notions of exclusivity and excess. Yet it is precisely here, where expectations run high and reputations are fragile, that the potential for meaningful transformation is most powerful.



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What this framework ultimately suggests is that trust is not built in isolation. It depends on consistent signals, transparent communications, not as targets of persuasion, but as partners in shaping what sustainable branding can truly mean. Environmental literacy and the co-creation of values emerge as key enablers in this process, helping to bridge the gap between discourse and practice. Authenticity, then, is not a fixed trait but a process in motion, relational, negotiated, and deeply dependent on context.

More than a conceptual exercise, the framework offers practical guidance for brands that want to communicate their sustainability efforts with integrity. Building trust starts with transparency, not as a marketing strategy, but as a structural commitment. Regular internal audits, accessible and honest impact reports, and third-party certifications can all reinforce credibility. What matters is not perfection, but the willingness to open the process, show the work in progress, and be accountable in a consistent and meaningful way.

But transparency alone is not enough. Brands also need to stop speaking to their audience and start creating space for participation. Sustainable communication is, at its core, relational. This means inviting consumers into the convergence, through collaborative campaigns, open feedback channels, or user-generated content that reveals real values and shapes concerns. Trust grows when brands are willing to listen, respond, and involve. In this shift from monologue to dialogue, communication becomes not just a tool to promote sustainability, but a space to participate in it.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to explore how marketing strategies can foster trust in sustainable brand communication, particularly by helping consumers distinguish genuine efforts from greenwashing. Through a systematic review of the literature, three thematic clusters were identified, perception of authentic sustainability, sustainable authenticity in the luxury sector, and ethics and consumer engagement, which, together, highlight the complexity and dynamic nature of the process of building trust in this field.

The results suggest that trust does not simply stem from persuasive discourse, but is built on transparent, consistent and ethically sustained practices. In the fashion industry, marked by reputational fragility and high consumer scrutiny, brands must go beyond rhetoric and adopt participatory narratives and practices consistent with their sustainable commitments. In this context, ethics and consumer engagement stand out as critical mediators, positioning consumers as co-creators of meaning rather than mere recipients of the message.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes an integrative framework that repositions trust as a relational, co-constructed and evolutionary phenomenon, proposing a dynamic model of sustainable brand trust. This model offers a new analytical lens for understanding the role of sustainability practices in shaping brand credibility and reputation, especially in contexts where the risk of greenwashing is high.

On a practical level, the results offer concrete guidance for marketing professionals and brand managers: sustainable differentiation requires more than statements; it requires actions aligned with ethical values, consistent communication, and genuine engagement with consumers. The adoption of participatory practices can not only reinforce perceived authenticity but also mitigate the reputational risks associated with greenwashing.

This study also contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 12 (responsible production and consumption), by promoting more ethical and transparent marketing practices, and SDG 13 (climate action), by encouraging environmentally responsible consumer behaviour.

Despite these contributions, limitations inherent to the nature of the methodology used are acknowledged. The analysis was based exclusively on publications indexed up to 2023, which may exclude more recent research or relevant grey literature. Furthermore, the review did not analyse the cultural or geographical contexts of the included studies in a differentiated manner, which may influence the generalisation of the results.

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As guidelines for future research, we suggest conducting empirical studies that test the proposed model in different sectors and markets, with special attention to cultural diversity in the perception of authenticity and the effectiveness of participatory narratives. Longitudinal research may also reveal how trust in sustainability evolves over time in response to different communication strategies and reputational events.

In summary, this study proposes a relational, ethical and participatory approach to building trust in sustainable brands, offering valuable insights for researchers and professionals seeking to navigate an increasingly demanding market that is attentive to greenwashing practices.

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