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CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF SUSTAINABLE BRANDS IN THE FINNISH FOOD
AND BEVERAGE INDUSTRY

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Abstract: Despite advancements in comprehending brand value creation in relation to sustainability practices over the past decade, there is still a substantial gap in understanding consumer perceptions of sustainable brands. In today's competitive market brands need to establish and maintain a positive sustainability connotation, presenting a challenge especially for the food and beverage industry, as brands grapple to understand factors influencing consumer perceptions. By employing one-on-one interviews and thematic analysis, this study aims to contribute to academia and offer initial understanding for industry professionals regarding factors contributing to consumers perceiving a brand as sustainable within the food and beverage industry.

Keywords: sustainability, consumer perceptions, sustainable brands, the food and beverage industry, brand perception

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1. Introduction

Today's corporate world is permeated by a rising demand for companies to contribute in tackling the emerging climate crisis and addressing environmental concerns. A welcomed addition to this mandate is the growing consensus in both academia and the corporate community indicating a positive connection between sustainability efforts, company profitability and consumer behaviour (Neumann, Martinez and Martinez 2020; Modica et al. 2020; Majer et al. 2022). Furthermore, consumers are increasingly opting for products and services provided by companies that actively exhibit environmental and social responsibility (Homburg, Stierl and Bornemann 2013). This shift highlights the very central role of today's consumer in the emerging environmental movement and in tackling the climate crisis (McDonald and Oates 2006; Lin and Niu 2018; Van Bussel et al. 2022).

Hence, increased focus on corporate sustainability practices present an ample opportunity for businesses to set their brands apart from competitors, and to build trust amongst consumers. This has led researchers to focus on brand valuation in connection with sustainability communication (see e.g. Lee, Raschke and Krishen 2022; Cowan and Guzman 2020). Perceived brand value has been determined as one of the key catalysts for purchase behaviour and product choice, while also recognised as a vital factor for corporate success, competitive advantage and economic growth (Ökten et al. 2019; Gupta et al. 2020; Swaen, Demoulin and Pauwels-Delassus 2021). A strong brand value has further been connected to financial rewards, pricing flexibility, less vulnerability, and greater opportunities for brand extensions (Hoeffler and Keller 2003; Kay 2006). Gupta and Kumar (2013) explore brand value in relation to sustainability, and note that sustainability-connected brand knowledge and perception attracts customers and improves long term performance. Kumar and Christodouloupoulou (2014) further suggest a recent increase in consumers' preference to purchase from brands perceived as more

sustainable. However, consumer attitudes and purchasing intentions are impacted by a brand's sustainability initiatives only when consumers are aware of these efforts (Pomeroy and Dolnicar 2009). Thus, for brands to be able to profit from the positive connotations that sustainable brand perceptions bring, there is a need to comprehend which elements contribute to consumers' forming these perceptions. This presents an interesting research approach for scholars and academics in both business and psychological research domains. Hence, this paper aims to provide insights regarding the aforementioned area of interest. To do this, the following research question was formed: *What makes a brand perceived as sustainable within the food and beverage industry?*

1.1. The food and beverage industry

The emerging climate crisis and corporate activities' environmental strain is strongly connected to the food and beverage industry. As one of the largest industries in the world and responsible for 36% of global emissions (Coolset 2022), this industry is constantly under pressure to improve on environmental performance due to its connection to greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, and heavy water usage. Thus – with significant environmental and social impact, with major economic importance and as one of the key industries in tackling climate change and fostering sustainable consumption – the food and beverage industry is forced to find ways to implement sustainability efforts, to be able to have an outlook for the future. This industry thus presents an interesting focus in terms of sustainability research.

1.2. Consumers

Consumers have a significant impact in alleviating the environmental strain through purchase and dietary decisions (Feldmann and Ulrich 2015). Furthermore, the shaping of the food and beverage industry is heavily dependent on consumer awareness and behavior (Hartmann and Michael 2017; Schleenbecker and Hamm 2013). Environmental consciousness and sustainably inclined behaviour are steadily becoming the new consumer norm in the food and beverage

industry (Lazzarini, Visschers and Siegrist 2018). This change is an imperative one when transitioning towards more sustainable dietary patterns, and thus it is essential to understand how food and beverage brands are perceived by consumers within the concept of sustainability. Van Bussel et al. (2022) further highlight the fact that perceptions are of higher importance for growth than sustainable messages. However, consumers “need sufficient knowledge” (Peschel et al. 2016) and “access to accurate information” (Vermeir and Verbeke 2006) to form perceptions and subsequently make sustainable purchase decisions. This presents ample opportunity for academic research to explore consumers’ perceptions of sustainable brands in the food and beverage industry, aiming to form an understanding of the practical implications for businesses adapting to sustainable market demands.

1.3. Young adults

As the 21st century emerges, the leaders into sustainable pathways will be the Generation Z, born between 1997-2012, and aged between 11-26 in 2023. This generation is of particular interest to marketers and companies, as they are “the first generation to be brought up in an environmentally conscious world” (Ottoman 2011). Especially the older part of this cohort, that can be described as “young adults”, make an interesting focus group when researching consumer perceptions. Young adults are defined as individuals entering the workforce, or in the early stages of their careers. This consumer focus group has an increasing influence on the food and beverage industry, as they are developing into householders with a rising spending power (Ottoman 2011). Understanding how young adults perceive sustainable brands is thus vital in tackling the climate crisis. Van Bussel et al. (2022) suggest that academic focus is laid on exploring the beliefs and perceptions of the next generation in relation to sustainability. This understanding will be the pathway to fostering and enabling consumers to adopt more sustainable consumption patterns. Young adults further represent an interesting focus group, as they are known for their active engagement with sustainable practices and preferences, thus

making their perspectives valuable for understanding evolving consumer attitudes and shaping future industry strategies. The next generation will naturally also be the one affected by the rising issue of climate change. Therefore, Van Bussel et al. (2022) highlight the importance of monitoring younger populations in specific geographic areas while examining their thoughts and beliefs regarding environmental issues. This study will thus specifically focus on Finland as a country and on young adults residing in urban areas as a focus group.

1.4. Summary

As companies struggle to create awareness in today's crucial landscape – where transparency and trust is critical because consumers state that they are more willing to do business with companies that they trust to perform well on societal issues – this study aims to provide valuable insights in this challenge. Furthermore, an understanding of what contributes to sustainability perceptions is vital, as studies show that a mere emphasis on sustainable practices alone does not suffice to fortify a brand's standing amongst consumers. This study thus has a double purpose. It aims to advance an academic contribution by offering initial insights into consumer perceptions regarding sustainable brands, an area highlighted as important for targeted research focus. Furthermore, the results of this study will benefit managers and strategists within the food and beverage industry by providing valuable aid in understanding what contributes to consumer perceptions of sustainable brands.

1.5. Definitions

The term “sustainability” is defined in this paper by using the United Nations Brundtland Commission's definition from 1987. The definition states that sustainability is “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” The term “brand” is defined by using Oxford's English dictionary's definition, namely that a brand is “a type of product manufactured by a particular company under a particular name”.

2. Literature Review

The academic field comprises a considerable amount of studies conducted on the food and beverage industry in connection with various sustainability-related sub-domains. Furthermore, research priorities are constantly evolving alongside shifting consumer preferences and corporate strategies. The following literature review includes literature predominantly gathered via targeted word searches conducted on the freely accessible web search engine Google Scholar. The published papers are mainly, but not implicitly, published in Journals with an impact factor higher than 3, as determined by Clarivate's scientometric index. These deliberate selection criteria were made to ensure the inclusion of high-impact, peer-reviewed sources, thus improving the strength and credibility of the study. The literature review includes recent academic exploration in parallel with market trends within sustainability and consumer perceptions. Focus is laid on consumer perceptions of sustainability and of sustainable practices, more specifically in relation to brands in the food and beverage industry.

2.1. Consumer perceptions within the food and beverage industry

The majority of studies on consumer perceptions in relation to the food and beverage industry focus on exploring niche areas, such as plant-based options, packaging, local produce, organic products or eco-labels of different brands (see e.g. Ozturk and Akoglu 2020; Munshi et al. 2020; Otto et al. 2021; Potter et al. 2021). This can be traced back to a growing consumer interest in – and preference for – sustainable or eco-friendly products. A minority of researchers have however focused on exploring a more holistic consumer view of sustainability within the food and beverage industry. Amongst them, Vranešević and Stančec (2003) note that while understanding the consumer perceptions regarding one particular food product or its' attributes is crucial, it does not encapsulate the holistic essence of sustainability within a brand. Researchers focusing on consumer perceptions of sustainable company practices within the food and beverage industry mainly investigate specific corporate sub-areas, such as production,

sourcing, waste management or pollution (see, e.g. Paloviita 2010; Brennan et al. 2021) It is essential to acknowledge that sustainability is a multifaceted and broad concept, posing comprehensive challenges for both businesses and researchers due to its intricate nature. Mourad and Serag Eldin Ahmed (2012) further state that companies view sustainable activities as “... different, isolated and fragmented sets of activities such as recycling, reducing pollution and energy conservation...”, which may explain why academic focus is primarily laid on exploring consumer perceptions of specific sustainability sub-areas. Van Bussel et al. (2022) noted this research trend, and produced a systematic literature review including recent studies focused on the aforementioned sub-areas. This was the first study presenting an overarching view of consumer perceptions of sustainability in relation to food, and a welcomed addition to the academic field. However, Van Bussel et al. (2022) specifically point out that “...it would be of great interest to study the perceptions of food-related sustainability in selected target groups and segmented groups” and suggest qualitative research for exploring the underlying perceptions of consumers.

2.2. Brands in connection with sustainability perceptions

Most studies on consumer perceptions of brands in connection with sustainability in the food and beverage industry are focused on exploring the correlation between companies' communication efforts and consumer behaviour or sustainability awareness (see e.g. Hanss and Böhm 2012; Ritch 2015; Martínez et al. 2020 or Khayru, Amri and Gani 2021). Cowan and Guzman's (2020) quantitative study on companies' country-of-origin in relation to sustainability perception and brand performance is widely cited within the field. The scholars highlight the importance of future exploration of sustainability and consumer perceptions, stating that this specific academic realm is still relatively underdeveloped. Cowan and Guzman (2020) further pinpoint that while a quantitative approach may assist in discovering brand performance, different qualitative approaches will be necessary and beneficial for future

exploration of sustainability and consumer perceptions. Lee, Raschke and Krishen (2022) support this claim in their study on brand value in connection with sustainability communication. The scholars note that although the understanding of brand value creation in relation to sustainability practices has evolved in the past decade, much more remains to be understood regarding consumer perceptions of sustainable brands.

2.3. A need for targeted research

The general concept of brands and brand perception in modern society is a heavily researched topic (Lieven et al. 2015; Dam 2020). Albeit various qualitative and quantitative studies explore the connections between a strong brand image and consumer satisfaction, trust or purchasing behaviour; Chen, Chang and Chen (2020) note that very little focus is laid on exploring the brand in connection with "... green or environmental issues". The acceptability and emotional response associated with sustainable brands have been investigated in the realm of psychological academia by e.g. Yang et al. (2020) through qualitative in-depth interviews. While these findings can be beneficial for marketers and the corporate world, a study by Lazzarini, Visschers and Siegrist (2018) highlights that companies within the food and beverage industry struggle to pinpoint the specific factors contributing to consumer perceptions of sustainable brands. Building a strong brand is especially important in a market where consumers "...can be overwhelmed by too many choices..." (Vrontis and Pappasolomou 2007), which is especially true for the food and beverage market. Therefore, the academic field points towards a need for further targeted qualitative studies on how brand perceptions are built amongst consumers in connection with sustainability, namely in selected target groups. Furthermore, a focus on the food and beverage industry presents an ample opportunity for valuable knowledge-contribution.

However, the core problem, when trying to identify consumer perceptions about sustainability in relation to food and beverage brands, is the quantity of factors influencing this perception, which furthermore is a subjective one (Hanss and Böhm 2012). These factors include consumers' ethical considerations, intrinsic and extrinsic values, general environmental awareness, public agenda on sustainability education and brands' marketing strategies, to state a few. This presents a challenge for researchers and marketers. McDonald and Oates (2006) tried approaching this dilemma by conducting an interview-based study to extract consumers' holistic view of sustainability. The qualitative approach allowed them to extract perception patterns for marketers to draw conclusions from, and works as an encouragement for future researchers to try and grasp the intricate consumer perceptions of sustainability.

This study thus aims to follow suit and fill the research gaps noted from all of the above-mentioned areas of academic focus; consumer-perceptions of sustainability and of sustainable practices in connection with brands in the food and beverage industry. The research question: *“What makes a brand perceived as sustainable within the food and beverage industry?”* was thus formed. The suggestion to target specific groups or consumer segments is furthermore taken into the account, as the study aims to identify factors contributing to consumer perceptions of sustainable brands in the food and beverage industry, namely in the specific context of urban young adults – identified as the up and coming consumer generation. The study will focus on Finland as a country, and aims to fill knowledge gaps by presenting a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to consumers perceiving certain brands as sustainable within the food and beverage industry.

3. Methodology

In this section, the selected research methodology employed in this study is presented in detail, in combination with an explanation to the rationale behind its selection. Qualitative research

has recently gained status beyond merely social sciences, and is nowadays widely adapted within business research to provide in-depth insights and understanding of complex phenomena (Doz 2011). More specifically, a qualitative study is of place when the aim is to understand perceptions from the participant's perspective and to explore individuals' interpretations of reality (Merriam 2002). Hence, as the objective of this study is to understand why consumers within the food and beverage industry perceive a brand as sustainable – a complex phenomena encompassing individuals interpretations of reality – a qualitative research approach is deemed appropriate.

3.1. Data collection approach and language considerations

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method for data collection, allowing for a holistic overview of a concept as they balance structure and flexibility, thus providing the researcher with exploration opportunities while ensuring coverage of key topics (Alshenqeti 2014). A set of predetermined questions were prepared, combined with the possibility to deviate from the script based on responses. This approach allowed for in-depth exploration of interesting areas and emerging specific topics, while facilitating easier comparison of responses across participants. Furthermore, to ensure that responses were not influenced by the researcher's own biases, no introductory information or definitions of sustainability were provided (Merriam 2002). When dealing with cross-cultural studies in international business, Chidlow, Plakoyiannaki and Welch (2014) highlight the fact that language should not be seen as a hindrance to theoretical insight – but rather as a valuable source for generating such insights. Therefore, the choice to conduct the interviews in the participants native languages Finnish and Swedish, was made to allow for genuine cognitive perceptions. The interview questions were not sent to the participants in advance, but presented in the beginning of the interview, to retrieve unaffected responses in participants' own words (Kagawa 2007). An English translation of the interview questions, in subsequent order, can be found below.

1. *"Do you know what sustainability means? Could you provide a definition in your own words?"*: allows for fundamental exploration of the participants' **perspectives and thoughts** regarding sustainability, providing context for subsequent responses and inquiries into how these conceptualisations influence sustainability perceptions of brands in the food and beverage industry
2. *"Please name brands within the food and beverage industry that you perceive as sustainable"*: prompts participants to **identify specific brands** they perceive as sustainable
3. *"Can you explain why you think these brands are sustainable?"*: participant's **reasoning and criteria** for perceiving a brand as sustainable, providing qualitative data on the factors influencing perceptions
4. *"Where did you find out about this information? What channels?"*: additional information, explores the sources of information influencing consumers' perceptions, highlighting specific **communication channels** in shaping consumers understanding of sustainable brands
5. *"What activities or actions do you think are important if a brand wants to be perceived as sustainable?"*: uncovers consumers' expectations and preferences regarding sustainable practices, provides insights into the **actions** that brands can take to align with consumer perceptions

3.2. Sampling approach and data collection methods

The process of sampling and sample size is a highly disputed topic within qualitative research. Marshall's (1996) widely recognised approach to sampling advocates nonrandom sampling when the aim is to explore complex issues relating to human perception, as random sampling often falls short due to small qualitative sample sizes, thus hindering the achievement of a normal distribution. In this study, nonrandom sampling is selected as a sampling method,

prioritising in-depth exploration over generalisability of results (Robinson 2014; Marshall 1996). As this study will focus on the target group of urban young adults in Finland – a specific demographic and geographical setting within a local context – the sampling was done via a combination of convenience and judgement sampling. This method allows for a pre-selection of criteria to gather suitable interview participants (Robinson 2014). Nonrandom sampling is further particularly beneficial in qualitative research with the aim to explore in-depth insights and perspectives (Marshall 1996). The participants gave their explicit permission for the recording of the interviews and for usage of the data gathered through the interviews for the purpose of this study, emphasising the adherence to ethical guidelines. A consent form (see Appendix 1) was sent out to participants to ensure confidentiality and to inform about the voluntary nature of their participation.

3.3. Data transcription and translation approach

As the recorded interviews served as the solitary dataset for this study, manual transcription was chosen over the use of Artificial Intelligence tools, as the latter may overlook nuanced language-specific implications (Bolden 2015; Point and Baruch 2023). Clean transcription was chosen as a method to facilitate the data interpretation process, as suggested by Javadi and Zarea (2016). Throughout the transcription phase the focus was thus laid on wording the spoken content and on capturing the substance of the communication. By maintaining readability and coherence, the subsequent in-depth analysis of the findings was ensured (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2011). As this qualitative interview-based study was conducted in an environment where English is not the native language, the manually transcribed interviews were consequently translated to English to allow for the extraction of data. Free paraphrased translations of these transcriptions were conducted, as Filep (2009) suggests appropriate when the aim is to ensure a comprehensive and more precise understanding of the material.

3.4. Data analysis approach

There are numerous ways to analyse data collected via qualitative research. Thematic analysis is recognised as a widely employed data analysis approach in qualitative research. The scholars Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2011) suggest an exploratory, content-driven approach when researching questions such as: “What do x people think about y?” by analysing text from in-depth interviews of nonprobabilistic samples. As the research question in this study is of inductive nature and aims to explore complex phenomena, identify patterns, and present valuable insights based on the data collected during in-depth interviews, applied thematic analysis was deemed an appropriate approach.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection began with interviews in the participants’ native language, followed by manual clean transcriptions of these interviews. Subsequently, free paraphrased translations of the transcriptions were conducted. Thereafter, applied thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected, leading to the construction of themes and sub themes, finally resulting in insights to provide answers to the research question “*What makes a brand perceived as sustainable within the food and beverage industry?*”.

4.1. Data Collection

As mentioned, for the purpose of this study, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted to gather data about consumer perceptions of sustainable brands in the food and beverage industry. The interview participants were all young adults, specifically residing in bigger urban cities in Finland. This particular selection of the target group was made as it presents an interesting opportunity to investigate the formation and establishment of the emerging consumer generations’ behaviours, attitudes and values (Ottoman 2011; Van Bussel et al. 2022). Furthermore, Spero and Stone (2004) point out that young adults increasingly influence both older and younger generations’ purchasing decisions due to digital media influence, cultural shifts, brand loyalty, economic factors, interconnected generational

dynamics and evolving societal values. Nonrandom sampling was therefore chosen as a sampling method, allowing the intentional selection of participants based on specific characteristics or criteria. This sampling method is furthermore deemed appropriate when exploring in-depth perspectives of consumers (Marshall 1996). Crouch and McKenzie (2006) emphasise that the best way to conduct “analytic, inductive, exploratory studies” is by using a small sample, generally meaning 20 or less participants. A relatively small sample was considered appropriate, aligning with the nature of the study that emphasises preliminary exploration, intensive analysis, and a close researcher-participant relationship, while also allowing for complexity management. Therefore, the selected sample consisted of 13 individuals, aged between 21 and 26. The participants were all residing in larger Finnish urban cities (including Helsinki, Espoo, Turku, Lahti and Kuopio) and at the time of the interviews they all held a Bachelor’s degree or higher. The one-on-one interviews, lasting between 13 and 24 minutes, were conducted in the participants’ native language to facilitate and allow for the expression of authentic thoughts and insights, as suggested by Kagawa (2007). The platform Teams was used to conduct the interviews, allowing for audio recording, the simulation of face to face interview situations and the transcending of geographical boundaries (Lo Iacono, Symonds and Brown 2016).

4.2. Data Analysis

The interviews were manually transcribed and thereafter translated by adapting the method of free paraphrased translations (Filep 2009), to allow for subsequent data analysis. The systematic process of thematic analysis – defined by Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2011) – was applied to identify themes and patterns from the data. This methodological framework is used to examine and identify themes from textual data in a systematic, yet iterative, way. While systematic, the discovery of themes however includes some elaboration along the way, resulting in an inductive process.

The initial stage of the thematic analysis involved reading and re-reading the translated transcripts, while comparing and contrasting findings along the way. The goal was to identify possible keywords, prevailing themes, structures or patterns. This process subsequently led to a preliminary list of possible codes (see Appendix 2 for keywords and preliminary codes), as suggested by Javadi and Zarea (2016). The initial codes were thus extracted via thorough examination of the data, whereafter these codes were applied to the original data set for further analysis. By grouping together codes including similar concepts, wordings, phrases and meanings, more general themes and sub themes could be extracted (see Appendix 3). While some codes resulted in the formation of themes, other codes resulted in sub themes. The goal when extracting themes from codes was to achieve “internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity” (Javadi and Zarea 2016), meaning that the data within a theme should have meaningful connections, while the themes should be clearly and distinctly identifiable as different from each other. Sub themes, which are defined as “themes inside themes” (Javadi and Zarea 2016), were identified lastly by reviewing and refining primary themes. The themes and sub themes extracted via thematic analysis described different aspects of what contributes to consumers’ perception of sustainable brands within the food and beverage industry.

As the iterative process calls for reanalysis of data, the extraction of codes – as well as themes – was conducted by revising and possibly adjusting initial findings based on new insights gained throughout the process (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2011; Javadi and Zarea 2016). As Javadi and Zarea (2016) suggest, the final phase of thematic analysis begins subsequent to the gathering of a good set of themes. Only after finalising this phase can the concluding analysis be done, consisting of the actual writing and reporting of the themes. The output of a thematic analysis does not necessarily need to connect to, nor be supported by, actual theoretical

frameworks (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2011), thus allowing for systematic yet flexible and inductive interpretation of data. The process does not rule out theoretical development *per se*, but primarily aims to describe and interpret consumers' feelings, thoughts and behaviours related to the research question. Noticeable is that the fundamental challenge when presenting findings from data collected via qualitative research is presenting the data in a convincing manner, while proving relevance of the findings in today's evidence-based and numerically focused world. Thus, thematic analysis may include going beyond mere sharing of narratives and quotations and implementing quantification into the data presentation and extraction process. So, although this study is approached with a qualitative research method, the data is extracted based on quantitatively recurring themes, phrases, and wordings.

5. Findings and Discussion

The thematic analysis was done by identifying codes from the transcriptions, subsequently grouped together to general themes and sub themes, providing insights to the research question: *“What makes a brand perceived as sustainable within the food and beverage industry?”*. The extracted themes are summarised in the table below (see Appendix 4 for an overview of the prevalence of themes and sub themes across interviews). The subsequent section of the paper provides more detailed insights into the themes, as well as exploration and discussion regarding additional findings.

Table 1 - Summary of findings, including themes and sub themes

Theme	Sub theme	Definition
Domestic Produce	Trust in Local	Finnish brands are perceived to adhere to sustainability standards and to conduct business ethically to a greater extent than international brands.
	Transportation Impact	Domestic sourcing and local produce is perceived to emit less greenhouse gas emissions.
	Domestic Economic Support	Favouring finnish brands equals supporting Finnish farming and the local economy.
Innovation & Sustainable Food Choices	Plant Based Products	Plant based substitutes for meat or dairy products are perceived as sustainable. The livestock industry is regarded as an environmental concern due to emissions.
	Solutions to Food Waste	Using leftover products is more sustainable than producing new ones.
Packaging	Labels	Sustainability labels serve as a guarantee of sustainable business conduct.
	Colour & Design	Colour and design of the package send sustainability messages as e.g. green or earthy colours are perceived sustainable.
	Reusable Materials	Recyclability and the use of less plastic is connected to sustainability.
	Messaging	Visualisations or insights about emissions or the supply chain on the package are perceived sustainable.
Sustainability Communication	Social Media Presence	Social media presence and sustainable communication on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram impacts perceptions.
	Statements & Advertising	Bold or pushy advertising or articles on sustainability efforts contribute to brands being perceived as more sustainable.
	Word of Mouth	Sustainability perceptions are formed through word-of-mouth communication. Opinions and/or recommendations of friends and family matter.

5.1. Domestic Produce

“Domestic Produce” was extracted as a consistent theme when discussing sustainable brands, as 81% of participants mentioned aspects of it. Furthermore, 11 out of the 15 brands mentioned during the interviews were Finnish brands, highlighting a preference for locally produced and

homegrown products and brands. Discussions revealed the reasons behind this common denominator to be manifold, thus resulting in the emergence of three major sub themes; “Trust in Local”, “Transportation Impact” and “Domestic Economic Support”. The sub theme “Local Sourcing” highlights a generally higher trust and confidence in Finnish production and business conduct. 27% of participants stated a general mistrust toward foreign sourcing or production practices, leading to a diminished confidence in the sustainability focus of such brands and, subsequently, to a preference for Finnish brands and products sourced or produced within the domestic environment. The second sub theme of “Transportation Impact” emerged as 63% of participants focused on the negative environmental impacts of international sourcing or production. The rationale behind this was rooted in the perception that non-domestic sourcing contributes to longer transportation routes and subsequently results in higher greenhouse gas emissions, which was negatively connotated with sustainability. *“Then also, of course, the path to the end consumer is very important. If a product is plant-based and great, but it travels halfway around the globe to get to the end consumer, it kind of loses its goodness. (3)”* The third sub theme of “Domestic Economic Support” highlights an economical sustainability connection, as Finnish brands were perceived to support the local economy and domestic workforce to a higher extent than non-Finnish brands. Mistrust towards non-Finnish brands or international production may be an explanation to why participants perceived brands that marketed home grown produce or their support of local farmers as sustainable brands. However, participants were aware of the fact that domestic produce does not always directly translate to sustainability or sustainable business practices. *“Home grown or domestic is perhaps first and foremost something that I connect to sustainability. This does not mean that if something is domestic, it is automatically sustainable. But if it is domestic, it consumes less material from other places on the earth, and thus emissions connected to it are generally smaller. (2)”* Nevertheless, participants consistently connected Finnish brands and local sourcing to

sustainability, emphasising “Domestic Produce” as a reason to why certain brands are perceived as sustainable within the food and beverage industry.

5.2. Innovation and Sustainable Food Choices

The theme “Innovation and Sustainable Food Choices” emerged as an important factor contributing to consumer’s perceptions of sustainable brands within the food and beverage industry. 72% of participants mentioned aspects within the realm of innovation when discussing sustainable brands. *“I would say that they are sustainable because they look for innovations to solve environmental problems, so that certainly plays a big role. (6)”* The innovative aspect was divided into two prevailing sustainability connotations made by participants, namely “Plant Based Products” and “Solutions to Food Waste”. Furthermore, 75% of participants acknowledged the meat and dairy industry as an environmental concern due to high greenhouse gas emissions, providing initial understanding as to why 8 of the 15 brands mentioned as sustainable were brands explicitly or heavily focused on plantbased products. *“The brand is trying to turn away from the whole dairy industry, and therefore I would say that they are sustainable. Because they are trying to think about the future and of coming up with substitutes for milk-based products. (5)”* Thus, brands offering innovative solutions, particularly in terms of minimising food waste or brands encouraging vegetarian or vegan options, were generally perceived as sustainable.

5.3. Packaging

“Packaging” was extracted as an important contributor to sustainability perceptions, as different aspects of the theme emerged in 54% of the interviews. The theme was furthermore found to strongly connect to the introductory question of the interview, as 61% of participants used phrases and wordings connected to recyclability, cycle of a product and reusability of a product when asked to define the word “sustainability”. Aspects such as colours or design of a package, placement of the package in the store as well as the presence of sustainability labels or

certificates on the package were furthermore mentioned as influential factors in shaping perceptions of a product's sustainability. The sub themes "Labels", "Colour and Design", "Reusable Materials" and "Messaging" were identified as the most prevailing connotations. The emergence of the theme "Packaging" highlights an important finding: sustainability perceptions are notably shaped during the purchasing process. *"It is probably pretty much only in the grocery store that I notice the sustainability aspect of brands. I especially pay attention to what the product looks like and what kind of information there is on that product. (13)"* Other participants connected statements about carbon footprint contributions or visualisations of different stages of the supply chain shown on the packaging or on the actual product to sustainability, highlighting the link between transparency and sustainability. These findings further emphasise the positive connotations of brands that communicate their sustainability efforts through package design.

5.4. Sustainability Communication

Strongly connected to the theme of "Packaging", but however represented as an independent theme, are the many aspects connected to branding and marketing when it comes to sustainability perceptions. Therefore, a fourth theme identified as a contributor to why consumers perceive certain brands as sustainable is summarised as "Sustainability Communication", appearing in 63% of the interviews. This theme was extracted as an umbrella term, covering different emerging aspects such as sustainability messages, sustainable branding through campaigns and marketing, the impact of social media presence on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, the communication through bold statements via various advertising channels, and the opinions of family and friends when discussing sustainable brands. *"Well, I guess it is really just their branding, it is done in a way that makes you interpret that they want to be sustainable and do good. (4)"* The theme "Sustainability Communication" thus includes the sub themes "Social Media Presence", "Statements and Advertising" and "Word of Mouth".

“Well, they market themselves as sustainable a lot. I would say that a normal consumer does not check out the value chain nor investigate specific manufacturers. I think that some companies have sustainability as their whole image or as a key selling point (....), so I guess it comes down to how you have been able to brand yourself really. (7)” Furthermore, “transparency” as a word was used by 63% of participants when discussing what brands should focus on if they want to be perceived as sustainable. This underlines the importance of clear and precise sustainability communication for accurate sustainability perceptions.

5.5. Communication in its various forms

An overarching theme running through the results of this study is the pivotal role of communication in shaping consumer perceptions of sustainable brands in the food and beverage industry. Communication, in its various forms, appears as the foundation to many of the extracted themes and sub themes, ultimately dictating how consumers interpret and respond to a brand’s sustainability initiatives. The findings of this study hence coincide with previous research (see e.g. Furlow 2014; Wognum et al. 2011; Simpson and Radford 2012) acknowledging clear and effective communication as the catalyst for how brands convey their commitment to sustainability. To benefit from sustainability connotations amongst consumers, findings from this study suggest that the themes extracted are especially important to take into consideration in terms of communicational efforts. Brands that support local production or focus on innovative solutions should hence clearly and effectively communicate on these efforts. Communication through package design should moreover not be overlooked, as it is a crucial contributor to the forming of sustainable brand perceptions. The findings of this study thus suggest that the collective impact of communication derives not from any single element, but from the synergy of multiple elements functioning together.

5.6. The sustainability gap

Given the study's objective of pinpointing what contributes to consumers' perceptions of sustainable brands in the food and beverage industry, it is crucial to highlight that doubts regarding the authenticity of sustainability claims were prevalent among almost all participants, emerging in 81% of the interviews. Most participants expressed doubts especially when discussing the specific brands perceived by them as sustainable, highlighting the fact that they were not sure to which degree the factual determination of the brands actual sustainability was true or not. Discussions revealed the reason behind this uncertainty: participants felt that they did not possess enough information regarding a brand's sustainability performance, nor had they actively sought out such information. Thus, it became evident that many regarded a clear distinction between perceived sustainability and factual or real sustainability claims. This distinction has emerged in previous research as "the gap between stakeholder perceptions and firm performance", noted by e.g. Pelozo et al. (2012). The findings of this study offer further proof that consumers perceive a certain dissonance between perceived sustainability of certain brands and the actual reality. Although this study does not further explore this potential misalignment, the persistent belief that such misalignment exists remains notable. Previous studies pinpoint the importance of clear sustainability messaging and transparency as a remedy for this (Campbell et al. 2015; Simpson and Radford 2012), further connecting back to the pivotal role of communication in addressing or exacerbating these doubts and uncertainties. This study contributes to the findings by providing additional evidence that transparency and communication are crucial elements if a brand wants to be perceived as sustainable by consumers within the food and beverage industry.

5.7. The inflation of the term "sustainability"

In relation to doubts regarding a brand's true sustainability focus and actions arises another interesting finding, relating to challenges in sustainability communication. The finding is enclosed especially well by one participant's statement: "*...and I would maybe also say that in*

today's world the word 'sustainability' has become a bit inflated, as everything is now suddenly sustainable. If someone says that something is sustainable, the word does not have as much of an effect on me anymore, because it feels like everything should be sustainable. Then, suddenly, you do not know what is real anymore, or what the truth actually is." (6). This statement underlines the growing scepticism towards sustainability in parallel with the aforementioned gap regarding a brand's sustainability practices. The overuse and misapplication of the term "sustainability" present communication challenges for brands. Scholars such as Campbell et al. (2015) and Károly (2011) have noted the widespread application of the term sustainability. This vast overuse and application to a multitude of actions, products, services and practices is leading to a dilution of the term's impact. Numerous studies (Costanza and Patten 1995; Kuhlman and Farrington 2010; Bañon et al. 2011; Giovannoni and Fabietti 2013) over the past decades have focused on defining, rethinking, characterising and mapping out the intricate meaning of the term "sustainability", highlighting the need for clarity in its application. The ubiquity of the term has led to a general mistrust of sustainability claims amongst consumers, highlighting the importance of transparent communication as well as a need for general guidelines or universal standards surrounding sustainability claims.

6. Conclusion

As companies grapple with the growing demand for environmental responsibility, this study aims to explore and enhance the understanding of why consumers perceive some brands as sustainable within the food and beverage industry. Thematic analysis was applied to identify key factors shaping these perceptions, uncovering four themes connected to brands as especially influential from a consumer standpoint. These themes include both tangible brand actions or practices, as well as effective marketing and branding efforts. The crucial role of communication emerged as especially significant, as the theme was revealed to influence and overarch many of the extracted themes and sub themes. The findings highlight the fact that on

one hand, communication can be done via more immediate measures directly tied to the physical product, such as packaging design. These measures provide necessary information to consumers in the process of purchase decisions at the point of sale. On the other hand, communication can be done via broader, ongoing efforts such as advertising or campaigns. These measures build a long-term relationship with consumers in connection with sustainability. Findings furthermore reveal that consumers acknowledge a distinction between perceived sustainability and actual reality, identified as a sustainability gap. Doubts about the authenticity of sustainability claims also surfaced in the study, highlighting the need for transparency in communication. Moreover, the term “sustainability” was found to be the subject to some inflation, with participants noting its overuse and subsequent diminished impact, which may explain why the sustainability gap exists. This presents a challenge for brands navigating in a landscape where consumers are increasingly sceptical, necessitating clear and credible communication to establish genuine sustainability perceptions. Brands can address this challenge by clear communication, specifically focusing on the themes emerging from this study, to influence consumers perception about brand sustainability within the food and beverage industry. By narrowing its focus to young adults in urban areas in Finland, this study provides valuable insights into specific demographical perceptions, considering their rising influence and spending power. In essence, these findings may contribute to research in the field by uncovering some of the complexities surrounding sustainable brand perceptions, offering initial insights into the factors influencing young adults’ perceptions. The implications of this study further extend to industry managers and strategists, providing guidance on understanding and aligning with consumer expectations in pursuing sustainable brand success.

6.1. Limitations

A number of limitations of the present study need to be acknowledged. First and foremost, this research relies heavily on specific qualitative data. The combination of convenience and

judgement sampling – combined with the relatively small sample – come with limitations and lesser demographic and geographical distribution, subsequently hindering generalisation of results. While thematic analysis provides rich insights, it is inherently a subjective process and may lack the statistical robustness associated with quantitative studies. Importantly, it is also worth noting that this study concentrates solely on exploring consumers’ standpoints, and how they form perceptions about sustainable brands, without delving into the verification of these perceptions against specific brands’ sustainable practices or messaging. Specific brands emerging (see Appendix 5 for a complete list) were however not further investigated nor highlighted, as the focus was laid on exploring brand perceptions from a consumer point of view. This study thus aims to shift the focus from corporate performance and “green” or “sustainably conscious consumers” towards understanding the underlying reasons to what contributes to a brand being perceived as sustainable by consumers. Therefore, general statements without considering the context and limitations of this project should be made with consideration.

6.2. Suggestions for future research

The study acknowledges the need for further exploration and the importance of targeted qualitative research to deepen the understanding of evolving consumer perceptions of sustainable brands. Complementary quantitative studies would provide a broader perspective and could validate the identified themes on a larger scale. Moreover, by expanding the demographic scope to include a more diverse participant pool across age groups, geographical locations, and cultural backgrounds is recommended to enhance the generalisability of findings. Lastly, exploring the dynamics of brand perceptions in connection to sustainability in the context of different industries and academical realms would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how these perceptions are formed.

7. Appendix

7.1. Appendix 1 – Interview and Data Collection Consent Form

Permission for Use of Data in the Interview Process for Master’s Thesis Research at Nova School of Business and Economics

This study is conducted by May Else Vannasmaa, student of the Master’s in Management program at Nova School of Business and Economics (Nova SBE). The research study explores consumer perceptions of sustainable brands within the food and beverage industry. The purpose of the research is to investigate the factors contributing to these perceptions and to contribute valuable insights to the field of sustainable business practices.

Study Overview:

This research is conducted in fulfilment of the requirements for a Master’s thesis at Nova SBE. The study adheres to ethical guidelines and maintains the highest standards of academic integrity.

Data Use, Confidentiality and Anonymity

The information provided during the interview process will be treated with utmost confidentiality. Participants’ identities will remain anonymous, and all collected data will be used solely for the purpose of this research. Individual responses will not be disclosed, and the results will be presented in an aggregated and anonymised manner. The information will not be utilised for any other purpose, commercial or otherwise, ensuring the highest level of confidentiality and integrity.

Participant Consent

Participants in this study are providing their consent voluntarily. Participation in the interview process is not obligatory, and participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

By participating in the interview process, I understand and agree to the terms outlined above. I acknowledge that my responses will be used for the stated research purposes and that my identity will be kept confidential.

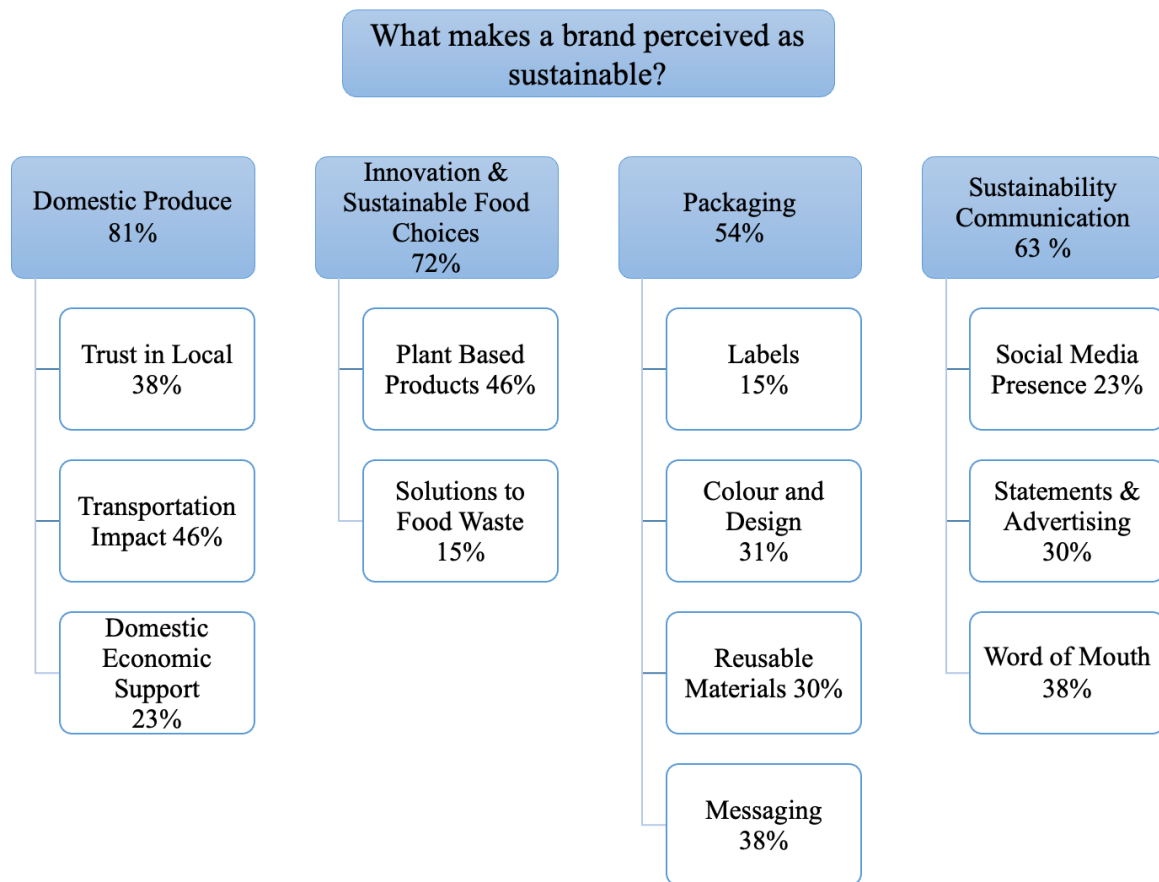
7.2. Appendix 2 – Keywords and preliminary list of possible codes

Keywords	Preliminary list of possible codes
domestic, home-grown, local, Finnish produce, emissions from transportation, domestic production, support the local economy, support farmers, imported products, greenhouse gas emissions, transportation costs, the way to the end consumer, domestic brands, responsible production in Finland	Domestic Produce, Local Sourcing, Support of Local Economy, Finnish Brands
innovative solutions, tackling environmental concerns, solutions to food waste, meat production, methane emissions from animals, using leftovers, create sustainably from the beginning, vegetarian options, vegan food, milk substitutes, dairy industry, innovational, more sustainable options	Innovative Food, Vegan & Vegetarian Products, Milk and Dairy Industry, Food Waste
packaging, design of the package, recyclability, cycle of the product, plastic, non-plastic, colour and design, less plastic, sustainable material, sustainability labels, recyclable materials, emissions, supply chain, transparency, statements on the package	Package, Packaging, Materials, Colour & Design, Labels, Information on the package, Recyclability
outdoor marketing, campaigns, social media presence, Instagram, bold statements, advertising, cinemas, television, word of mouth, speaking with friends, news, statements, sustainable branding, marketing focus	Social Media Channels, Outdoor Marketing, Word of Mouth, News Articles, Branding

7.3. Appendix 3 – Extraction of themes and sub themes from preliminary codes

Preliminary list of possible codes	Themes	Subthemes
Domestic Produce, Local Sourcing, Local Economy Support, Finnish brands	Domestic Produce	Trust in Local, Transportation Impact, Domestic Economic Support
Innovative Food, Vegan, Milk and Dairy Industry, Leftovers	Innovation & Sustainable Food Choices	Plant Based products, Solutions to Food Waste
Package, Packaging, Materials, Colour & Design, Labels, Information on the package, Recyclability	Packaging	Labels, Colour and Design, Reusable Materials, Messaging
Social Media Channels, Outdoor Marketing, Word of Mouth, News Articles	Sustainability Communication	Social Media Presence, Statements & Advertising, Word of Mouth

7.4. Appendix 4 - Summary of the prevalence of themes and sub themes



7.5. Appendix 5 – Brands perceived as sustainable

Brands mentioned as sustainable	Vegetarian/ vegan focused brand	Finnish brand	The amount of interviews in which the brand was mentioned (out of 13)
Oatly	✓		6
Oddly Good	✓	✓	4
Valio		✓	4
Härkis	✓	✓	3
Rebel Eats	✓	✓	2
Atria		✓	2
Hälsans Kök	✓		1
Beyond Meat	✓		1
Saarioinen		✓	1
HK		✓	1
Ruohonjuuri	✓	✓	1
Earth Control	✓		1
Pirkka		✓	1
Foodin		✓	1
ResQ		✓	1
Total	15	11	30

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