

**Topic: The Impact of Sustainability Marketing Communication on Brand
Trust: A Multiple Case Study of Grocery Retailers in the UK**

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Table of Contents

1.	Introduction.....	3
1.1	Background of the study.....	3
1.2	Industry Context.....	3
1.3	Research Problem.....	3
1.4	Research Rationale.....	4
1.5	Research Aim.....	4
1.6	Research Objectives.....	4
1.7	Research Questions.....	4
2.	Literature Review.....	6
3.	Research Methodology.....	9
3.1	Research Philosophy.....	9
3.2	Research Approach.....	9
3.3	Research Design.....	9
3.4	Research Strategy and Data Sources.....	10
3.5	Data Collection and Selection Criteria.....	10
3.6	Data Analysis.....	10
3.6	Ethical Considerations.....	11
3.8	Methodological Limitations.....	11
4.	Expected Findings.....	12
5.	Research Limitations.....	12
6.	Gantt Chart.....	13
7.	Conclusion.....	14
	Reference.....	15

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Sustainability is a strategic priority for organisations in all industries as growing environmental awareness, climate change, and a growing scarcity of resources and stakeholder pressure continue to drive changes in business practices. Retailers are now expected to play a role in reducing their environmental footprint, proving their ethical sourcing, responsible supply chain and social responsibility. Organisations have therefore dedicated a great amount of resources to sustainability efforts and the accompanying marketing communication to highlight their sustainable development efforts and build trust with consumers and other stakeholders (Walliman, 2021). But as consumers are gaining awareness of sustainability issues, so too are their expectations that organisations will make clear, evidence-based and verifiable sustainability information – not general or unsubstantiated environmental claims. As a result, sustainability marketing communication has become an important factor in their organisational reputation and consumer trust.

1.2 Industry Context

The grocery retail sector in the UK is one of the most competitive in retail, with big supermarket brands such as Marks & Spencer (M&S), Tesco, Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's competing with each other for both price and product quality, but also for their performance on sustainability. In recent years, consumers have begun to think of sustainability and ethics as part of their purchase considerations, prompting stores to make sustainability a part of their branding and marketing strategies (Wu and Liu, 2022). Meanwhile, regulators and industry groups have added more oversight of environmental claims to stamp out deceptive marketing and enhance business transparency.

1.3 Research Problem

While sustainability has become a key part of business strategy, there is still a challenge for organisations to effectively communicate their sustainability initiatives. As the public becomes more aware of greenwashing, so do consumers begin to be more sceptical of environmental

marketing, especially in the absence of transparency and supporting information. Previous studies have studied sustainability marketing, CSR and brand trust separately, but few studies have comparatively examined the effect of the quality of sustainability marketing communication on brand trust among the leading supermarket retailers in the UK (Nemes et al., 2022). In addition, the understanding of the role of such communication attributes as credibility, clarity, consistency, and quality of evidence in enhancing and/or undermining consumer trust is weak.

1.4 Research Rationale

The study employs a case study approach to grocery retailers as it has been consistently focused on becoming a sustainable company with its Plan A strategy, which has given it recognition as a leader in responsible retailing. A comparison among top supermarket competitors in the UK (Marks & Spencer (M&S), Tesco, Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's) offers the chance to look at the differences in sustainability marketing communication between these retailers (Mugoni et al., 2024). The research is hoped to make a contribution to academic knowledge by adding to the understanding of the link between sustainability communication and brand trust by using a comparative documentary analysis.

1.5 Research Aim

The aim of this research is to investigate the impact of sustainability marketing communication on brand trust through a multiple case study of grocery retailers in the UK.

1.6 Research Objectives

The objectives include:

- To examine how M&S communicates sustainability through its Plan A strategy, annual reporting, corporate website and customer-facing brand messages.
- To evaluate how the quality and credibility of sustainability communication may support or weaken brand trust in the UK retail context, based on secondary documentary evidence.

1.7 Research Questions

The question includes:

- What are the sustainability marketing communication practices of Marks & Spencer (M&S) in comparison with Tesco, Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's?

1. Literature Review

Sustainability Marketing Communication

Sustainability communication is now seen as a tool to help organisations overcome information gaps, reveal accountability and build stakeholder trust. Sustainability marketing communication has some key attributes. First, by being transparent, organisations can share what they have accomplished as well as any current challenges that they are facing, which increases their credibility (Taherdoost, 2021). Secondly, consistency helps to make sustainability messages coherent across various communication channels and over the long term, eliminating confusion amongst stakeholders. Lastly, clarity makes it easier for consumers to grasp the definition and purpose of sustainability commitments without confusion, ambiguity, or misleading terminology.

Brand Trust

New studies have shown that, alone, sustainability programs are not enough to improve brand trust if they are not presented in a credible and consistent fashion. Increasingly, sustainable activities are not just rated by consumers as to whether or not they are carried out, but how transparent the organisation is in communicating these activities (Rassel et al., 2020). When consumers can measure the authenticity of the communications through tangible evidence, it leads to greater confidence, positive brand attitudes and loyalty. The opposite side, however, can see that hyperbole about the environment or where the environmental message is not aligned with the environment can lead to loss of credibility in the organisation, consumer scepticism and brand mistrust. The trust in the brand is also found to be a mediator between the sustainability communication and behavioural results, like customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth and purchase intention in several studies.

Theoretical Framework

The signalling theory is one theory that is suitable to analyse sustainability marketing communication as it addresses how organisations can communicate information to people in order to help to reduce uncertainty. There is information asymmetry between consumers and an organisation because consumers don't have as much information about the sustainability performance of an organisation as the organisation does (Prior et al., 2024). The sustainability reports, environmental certificates, annual reports and the corporate websites are then signals to communicate about the commitment of an organisation with regard to responsible business activity. Stakeholder Theory believes that value is created by an organisation as it meets

expectations set by a variety of stakeholder groups, not just shareholders (Qayyum et al., 2023). These stakeholders are growing more and more demanding that businesses operate in an environmentally sustainable way and communicate responsibly: customers, employees, suppliers, investors, regulators, local communities and environmental organisations.

Sustainability Marketing Communication in the UK Food Retail Sector

The UK grocery retail industry is used to illustrate sustainability marketing communication, as it has been the case for many years that key players in the industry have begun to add sustainability to their strategic agendas. Marks & Spencer, Tesco, Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's all have Sustainability information available in annual reports, ESG reports, on their corporate websites and through campaigns to their customers (Nemes et al., 2022). But, there are discrepancies in the depth, transparency and quality of these communications. Marks & Spencer's longevity of work around sustainability has earned the company a strong reputation with its long-running Plan A programme, which embeds sustainability within the company's strategy by focusing on environmental protection, responsible sourcing, circular economy and community engagement (Nordigården et al., 2025). The sustainability communication has been similarly enhanced at Tesco with a focus on reducing carbon, addressing food waste, sustainable sourcing and a Net Zero commitment. In addition, a lot of studies are on sustainability performance only, without critically assessing the quality, credibility and consistency of sustainability marketing communication.

Conceptual Framework

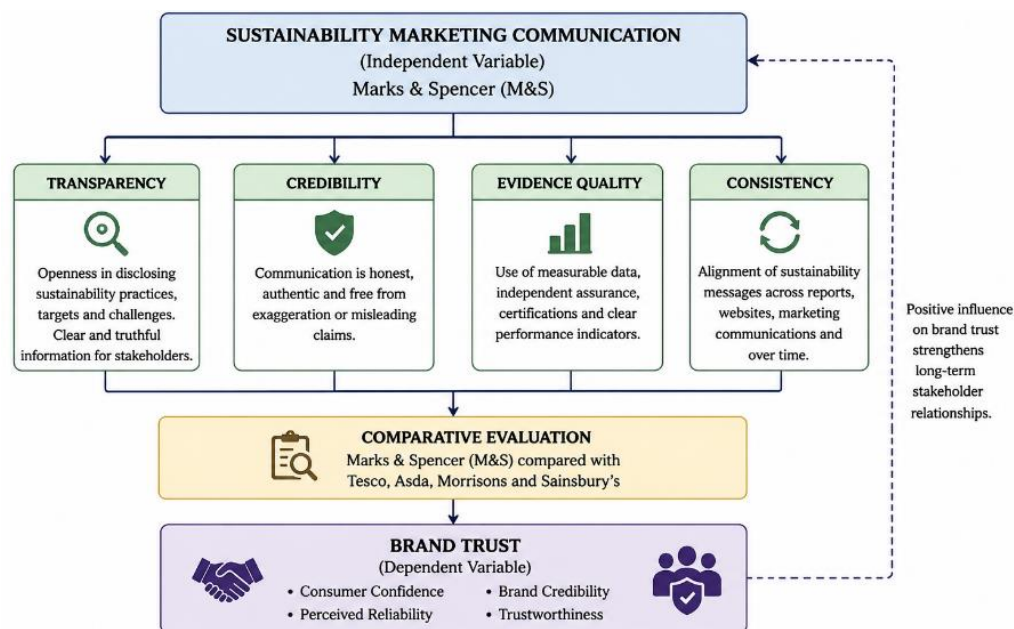


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework; Source: Author

Research Gap

The literature confirms that the role of communication in the field of sustainability has gained more and more relevance for the reputation and trust in organisations. But there are several key issues still to be addressed. First, previous literature mainly focuses on sustainability marketing or brand trust separately, and little research focuses on the communicative aspects that have an effect on the formation of trust (Mugoni et al., 2024). Secondly, there are numerous studies that do not examine the content and quality of the organisational communication of sustainability itself, but rather consumer surveys and experimental studies. Thirdly, although all of these organisations are based in one of the most competitive markets, there is an absence of comparative research between Marks & Spencer and Tesco, Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

This study is conducted using interpretivist research philosophy as it is a study that aims to understand the meanings, perceptions, and communication practices in a certain business context. The interpretation is a socially constructed way of defining the meaning of the message, as opposed to being objective; this is recognised in the view of Interpretivism (Li et al., 2024). For this research, the meaning and quality of the corporate sustainability stories will be analysed by using the interpretivist approach since the sustainability stories can have meaning and quality impacts on perceptions of credibility and trust.

3.2 Research Approach

In this study, the inductive approach of research will be used. There will be no hypothesis tested in the research; rather, patterns and themes will unfold out of the secondary documentary evidence (Kotler et al., 2026). This approach would be suitable as this study will explore the breadth of communication around sustainability in the UK by the various retailers and the nature of this communication (transparency, quality of evidence, consistency, and credibility).

3.3 Research Design

The research is of a qualitative type and uses the method of comparative case studies. The case study method is suitable for this study due to its advantages in providing a detailed analysis of the sustainability marketing communication in real organisations (Khoa et al., 2023). Marks & Spencer is chosen as the primary case organisation, and Tesco, Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's are selected to be the benchmark organisations, to give a comparative insight. This design will allow the study to highlight commonalities and differences in supermarket retailers' sustainability communication practices among the major supermarket retailers in the UK.

3.4 Research Strategy and Data Sources

In the study, the main method of conducting research is a documentary (secondary) study. The secondary research method is appropriate as the information needed is available from reliable sources (organisations or academic sources) (Jamal et al., 2023). The selected retailers are identified as the ones that will be targeted for data collection from their sustainability reports, annual reports, ESG disclosures, corporate websites, sustainability strategies, marketing communications, and publicly available policy documents as well.

3.5 Data Collection and Selection Criteria

Documents will be chosen based on their relevance of documents to the research goals. Recent publications and communications on the subject of sustainability will be given priority by the marks, and those made by the retailers Tesco, Asda, Morrisons, and Sainsbury's (Ha et al., 2022). The sources will be added where they have committed to sustainability, sustainability goals, ethical practices, reporting on sustainability progress, or customer-facing sustainability messages. The chosen documents will be evaluated systematically for evidence of how well they communicate, are clear, transparent, credible, consistent, and of high quality.

3.6 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the secondary data that is collected. The analysis will be used to identify, organise, and interpret themes that are found in sustainability communications. There will be key themes highlighted, such as transparency, credibility, claims based on evidence, and consistency of messaging and indicators of greenwashing (Frey et al., 2023). This will then be compared with the marketer's benchmark retailers. This comparison will enable the research to size up the difference in sustainability communication approaches and understand the effect of such differences on building better or worse brand trust perceptions.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This research will use only secondary data sources, which are publicly accessible; no participants will be involved, and so informed consent and the confidentiality of participants will not be an issue. However, ethical research will be upheld by accurate referencing, responsible interpretation of information, and avoiding information and communication being misrepresented by an organisation (Dale et al., 2025). Sources of information used in the research work will be cited appropriately using the academic referencing system.

3.8 Methodological Limitations

The limitations of secondary research are that a lot of information about the organisation is available, but the information isn't as accurate. Organisations may have a desired image in their marketing communications and corporate sustainability reporting, which may not necessarily be true for external stakeholders' views (Coe et al., 2025). Further, since this study has been conducted without primary data, it is impossible to measure the level of customers' trust directly.

4. Expected Findings

Marks & Spencer (M&S) is expected to be relatively transparent, consistent and evidence-based when it comes to communicating sustainability issues, as a result of its long-established Plan A strategy, compared to some of its competitors. The study will also demonstrate that messages on sustainability with tangible targets, regular updates on progress and evidence of credibility are likely to bolster stakeholder trust in the organisation and further increase their trust (Baldwin et al., 2022). There may be some differences in the approaches that the four retailers (Tesco, Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's) take in communicating about sustainability, which could be highlighted by the comparative analysis, such as how clear their sustainability claims are, the level of evidence, and the consistency of messages in corporate reports and customer communications. Consumers are likely to be more convinced of a retailer's brand credibility when there is a full, transparent sustainability report than if there is any mention of an environmental claim that may be more vague or less substantiated.

5. Research Limitations

This research is based on secondary information only, and thus cannot actually capture consumers' perceptions or experiences of the sustainability marketing communication. The results will therefore be grounded in the reading and interpretation of documents which are available to the public. Reports and marketing information from the company could portray organisations in a positive light, which could lead to a reporting bias (Badhwar et al., 2024). This limitation will be reduced by utilising more than one documentary source and literature, but there is no guarantee that it will be completely objective.

6. Gantt Chart

Activities	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10
Research proposal	●									
Comprehensive literature review	●	●	●							
Development of methodology		●	●							
Data collection				●	●					
Review of company reports and sustainability documents			●	●	●					
Documentary coding and thematic analysis					●	●	●			
Comparative analysis of M&S, Tesco, Asda, Morrisons and Sainsbury's						●	●	●		
Interpretation of findings								●	●	
Drafting								●	●	
Proofreading and formatting										●
Final submission										●

7. Conclusion

This proposal provides a framework for further research into the possibilities of the use of sustainability marketing communication to promote and/or damage brand trust for Marks & Spencer (M&S) in relation to other brands in the same market. The literature review highlighted that credibility, transparency, evidence quality and consistency are becoming key areas of focus in sustainability communication and that there is a lack of comparative research focusing on these in the leading UK supermarket retailers (Aïmeur et al., 2023). The study will use a qualitative secondary research approach using documentary analysis and thematic analysis of publicly available information from the companies to overcome this. The results will be useful for the academic community to enhance the knowledge base of sustainability marketing communication, as well as for the retail industry to develop more effective and credible sustainability communication to improve trust in their brands.

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