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**MBA Dissertation Proposal**

**The Influence of Eco-Friendly Packaging Claims on  
Consumer Trust: Evidence from UK Supermarket  
Consumers**

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## **1. Research Background**

Packaging offers a tangible indicator for assessing the implementation of 'green' retailing in supermarkets. UK grocery retailers make use of phrases like "recyclable", "plastic free", "recycled material" and "responsibly sourced" (Hallez, Spruyt, Boen and Smits, 2024). In this case, these are called credence qualities because they are beyond consumers' ability to independently ascertain the origin, reusability, life-cycle impacts, and disposal outcomes. Environmental claims can thus also be considered signals, which are effective if they appear clear, specific, backed up and independently confirmed.

This relationship matters to the commercial and institutional life in Great Britain. The obligations for EPR involve the obl' organisations making reports on packaging data and paying fees. The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) (2021) Green Claims Code and advertising requirements demand that environmental claims be accurate, transparent, verifiable and comprehensive throughout the duration of the product's life cycle (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), 2022). Nevertheless, complying does not make people trust. Defensible claims can fall short when consumers are unfamiliar with the terminology used, with the certifying body or if they think that the supermarket has hidden information on the environment.

Reactions to sustainable packaging are not necessarily all positive. Colours, natural imagery, materials and labels are used as shortcuts by shoppers, but there can be conflicts with the actual environmental performance (Ischen, Meijers, Vandeberg and Smit, 2022). Certain claims are more credible than sweeping statements, but to certify, the certifier must know what they're certifying and trust the sponsoring institution (Schmuck, Matthes and Naderer, 2018). Misleading claims or false exaggerations aggravate the confusion, perceived risk and negative brand reactions.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Without evidence, UK supermarkets invest in packaging enhancements and environmental communication, yet without knowing which characteristics of the environment's claims actually result in consumer trust. Therefore, while 'eco-friendly' statements can help to build trust, create apathy or spur suspicion, even if they meet legal requirements (Darnall, Ji and Vázquez-Brust, 2018). This ambiguity puts into question a practical risk: that communication

not fully understood or supported can hurt sustainability programs and the credibility of supermarket brands.

On the academic grounds, there's also patchy evidence. Packaging studies are mostly focused on design, purchase intention or willingness to pay. Eco-label studies focus on institutional trust, and greenwashing studies usually focus on advertising away from the grocery retail environment (Boz, Korhonen and Koelsch Sand, 2020). There are few studies which incorporate the four factors of perceived claim specificity, certification, third-party verification, claim credibility alongside greenwashing scepticism and consumer trust in one UK supermarket model. In this dissertation, that gap will be closed by means of a consumer-perception study. It won't cover packaging or evaluate the objective accuracy of claims (Gorton, Tocco, Yeh and Hartmann, 2021). Instead, it will explore how greenwashing scepticism manifests itself in consumer understanding of claims, investigate whether credibility becomes an important determinant of consumer trust and check whether greenwashing scepticism affects the link between credibility and consumer trust.

### **3. Research Aim**

To investigate how perceived characteristics and credibility of eco-friendly packaging claims influence consumer trust among UK supermarket consumers, while examining the moderating role of greenwashing scepticism.

### **4. Research Objectives**

- To evaluate UK supermarket consumers' awareness and perceptions of eco-friendly packaging claims.
- To determine whether claim specificity, certification, and third-party verification predict perceived claim credibility.
- To examine the relationship between perceived claim credibility and consumer trust.
- To test whether greenwashing scepticism moderates the relationship between perceived claim credibility and consumer trust.
- To develop evidence-based recommendations for credible supermarket packaging communication.

## **5. Research Questions**

- How aware are UK supermarket consumers of eco-friendly packaging claims, and how do they perceive them?
- To what extent do claim specificity, certification, and third-party verification predict perceived claim credibility?
- How does perceived claim credibility influence consumer trust in UK supermarkets?
- Does greenwashing scepticism moderate the relationship between perceived claim credibility and consumer trust?

## **6. Preliminary Literature Review**

### **6.1 Sustainable Packaging as a Consumer Signal**

The concept of packaging research is based on the premise that environmental improvement is not self-evoking. Based on the analysis of the results of Branca, Resciniti and Babin (2024), consumers were found to respond to the congruent as well as the incongruent designs depending on their environmental concern, while verbal claims and the visual appearance had equal and combined impacts on their reactions. de Freitas Netto, Sobral, Ribeiro and Soares (2020) even found that whilst the sustainability attribute was seen as highly salient. It was only moderately important for the product attitude in general. The participants also referred to wrong lay beliefs and graphics with no actual environmental relevance. Together, they reveal that consumers build their sustainability through cues, both of which fail to develop trust.

This is confirmed by the systematic review of Hallez, Spruyt, Boen and Smits (2024), which included 46 studies. There was a need for consumers to understand what packaging is environmentally friendly, a lack of consumer knowledge on new materials available and a tendency to focus on price and quality. It also revealed an attitude-behaviour gap. It fails to, however, explicate which message features create retailer credibility. The packaging claims in this dissertation are hence not regarded as objective sustainability proxies but rather as claims that must be interpreted.

### **6.2 Specificity, Certification, Verification, and Credibility**

But according to signalling theory, credible claims can help to mitigate information asymmetry between supermarket and consumers. Ketelsen, Janssen and Hamm (2020) conducted an experimental study on consumers, whereby two product arguments (specific and general) were

manipulated, and the results revealed that specific arguments lead to an increase in eco-label trust, whereas general arguments do not. The source effects varied, and purchase intention remained the same (Ketelsen, Janssen and Hamm, 2020). The outcome is specificity whilst clarifying the distinction between trust and behaviour. This is an untested proposition to be tested with real UK shoppers.

Compliance with the regulations is also on a conditional basis. Ischen, Meijers, Vandeberg and Smit (2022) tested more than 1,200 consumers in a stratified random sample and found that consumers' trust in the government and environmental organisations positively influenced their acceptance of the labels, whereas consumer distrust of these groups led to a rejection of the business-sponsored labels. When already high, consumers did not always differentiate between certified and uncertified labels. To date, however, research by Boz, Korhonen and Koelsch Sand (2020) revealed evidence of an increase in knowledge about third-party certification leading to a rise in label trust and use, across all European eco-labels. Apparent tension is not always persuasive, for unless the awareness and institutional trust are there, the apparent tension is not a meaningful cue. The perceived certification and verification should therefore be the dimensions used in the supermarket research and not just the presence of the logo.

### **6.3 Greenwashing Scepticism and Trust**

Greenwashing evidence explains signal failure. However, a study by Darnall, Ji and Vázquez-Brust (2018) with electronics consumers in Taiwan found that perceived greenwashing had a direct and indirect (via confusion and perceived risk) negative effect on green trust. In the experiment conducted by Gorton, Tocco, Yeh and Hartmann (2021), the attribution dimension has been introduced: the worse a company's environmental performance, the more negative the attitudes towards the brand, if companies attractively advertised it, which means consumer biases at an attribution level about their possible persuasive motive. There's no evidence that either of these is supermarket packaging, but in both instances, there is a need for consistency in action and in word.

Herbes, Beuthner and Ramme (2020) complicate the argument, though. Both across the US and German experiments, false claims resulted in greater perception of greenwashing, while vague claims were not as strongly recognised; nature imagery might trigger positive affect without accurate content provided. Schmuck, Matthes and Naderer (2018) have also conducted a systematic review of the field where firm-level greenwash and product-level greenwash, claim-based greenwash and executional greenwash are separated. The results suggest the

scepticism is not uniform and not always rational. May hinder deceit, but also hampers the ability to respond to a credible call. So it's more explanatory to model scepticism as a moderator rather than another negative predictor.

## **6.4 Critical Synthesis and Research Gap**

In the literature, three conclusions are tenable. Firstly, sustainable packaging signals do an effective job of grabbing people's attention but do not necessarily provide a positive assessment of the product (Herbes, Beuthner and Ramme, 2020). Secondly, its effects, which depend on knowledge and source trust, as well as on the purchasing situation, can be increased by specificity / and independent support. Third, there's such a thing as greenwashing, and people aren't always good at it, let alone being able to see through it (Branca, Resciniti and Babin, 2024). There is a methodological disarray of the evidence across experiments, cross-sectional surveys, systematic reviews, countries and product categories.

This study will integrate previously isolated constructs and examine to what extent specificity, certification and third-party verification are associated with an increase in the perceived credibility of a claim. To what extent an increase in perceived credibility of a claim is associated with an increase in supermarket trust. And to what extent greenwashing scepticism influences the relationship between perceived credibility of a claim and supermarket trust (de Freitas Netto, Sobral, Ribeiro and Soares, 2020). The contribution does not imply that perceptions are evidence of environmental performance. It is an account in relation to how shoppers develop trust in instances of asymmetry of info (Ischen, Meijers, Vandeberg and Smit, 2022).

## **7. Conceptual Framework**

Within the framework, perceived claim specification, certification and third-party verification are considered to be the antecedents of perceived claim credibility. The next step is that credibility predicts consumer trust, and thus is an explanatory mechanism for the effects of claim characteristics on trust (Darnall, Ji and Vázquez-Brust, 2018). There should be two paths: credibility to trust and credibility to moderated trust, and it is the latter path (moderated trust) that should vary depending on Greenwashing skepticism.

This model is based on a concept of signalling theory, because supermarkets have more information than the customers regarding the packaging material, its origin and its elimination (Branca, Resciniti and Babin, 2024). Closing the circle around specific information and

providing independent verification can indicate to a retailer that they're willing to put some money behind a solid commitment. But the signalling theory cannot be overemphasised as rational evaluation. According to the attribution theory, consumers also infer whether the environmental communication is about responsibility or has a sales intention (Herbes, Beuthner and Ramme, 2020). A combination of the theories thus brings together both the formation of trust and resistance. At the same time, the model is still simple enough that an eight-week quantitative study can be used to determine it and makes it clear how the constructs in the questionnaire should be and what statistical tests should be performed.

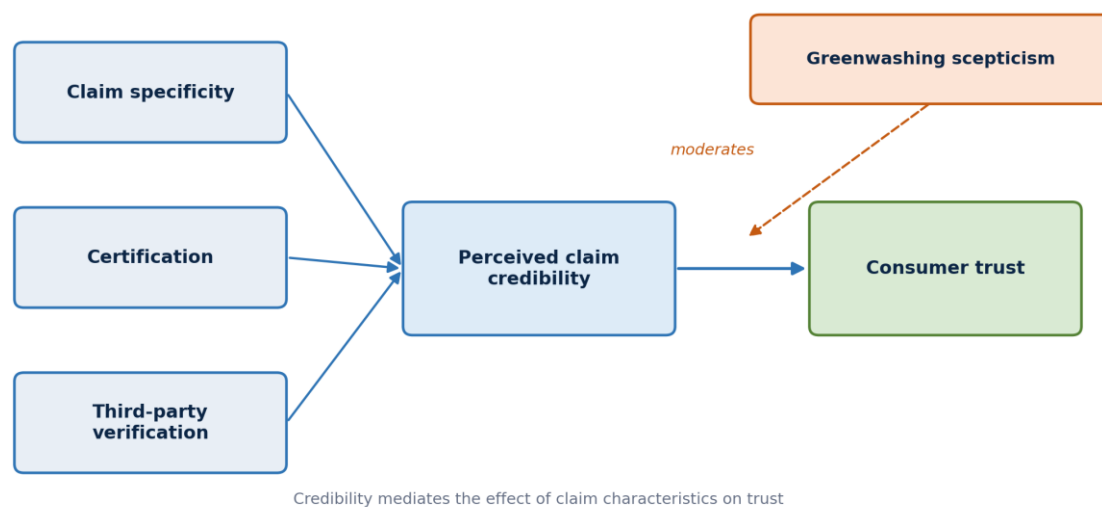


**Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework**

Source: (developed by the researcher)

## 8. Proposed Methodology

### 8.1 Philosophy, Approach, and Design

The research will use a positivist paradigm, deductive logic and a mono-method, which is quantitative. Specified relationships between measurable perceptions can be tested using a cross-sectional online questionnaire (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). The design allows for consistency for measurement, mediation, and moderation analysis. It cannot claim truth for a proposition or a tight causal time-based link; therefore, conclusions will be about statistical association and apparent influence.

## **8.2 Population, Sample, and Sampling**

The target population is UK residents aged 18 or over who have purchased a food item from a UK supermarket and actively noticed at least one environmental packaging claim over the last 6 months. These criteria will be enforced by screening questions. The study will attempt to get 80 completed responses. This aids the suggested regressions and acknowledges that not all cases might be completed or of excellent quality (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). Screening for this is to be done in the following ways: Purposive sampling, convenience sampling and snowball sampling using UK community, student, sustainability and consumer social-media networks (Aguinis, Bergh and Molina-Azorin, 2022). Due to the lack of representativeness of this non-probability method, the demographic composition is reported, but not described as nationally representative.

## **8.3 Data Collection and Questionnaire**

Once approved by ethics, an anonymous survey link will be sent online. The questionnaire will start with consent and screening, supermarket shopping behaviour and claim awareness. Respondents will then rate examples of claims that vary in length and are presented neutrally, such as a vague statement, a precise statement (such as a percentage), a certified statement, and a third-party-verified statement (Aguinis, Bergh and Molina-Azorin, 2022). Specificity, certification value, verification value, perceived credibility, consumer trust, and greenwash scepticism will be measured using five-point Likert items. Items will be adapted from existing research on trust in eco-labelling and greenwashing (Lock and Seele, 2015) and will be modified for supermarket-level packaging. Demographics will be limited to age group, gender, UK nation, education, and shopping frequency.

## **8.4 Data Analysis and Quality**

All data will be exported to SPSS and assessed for eligibility, missingness, straight-lining, duplication and too rapid completion. Using descriptive statistics, respondents and awareness will be profiled. Multi-item scales will be measured by Cronbach's alpha, item-total correlation, and exploratory factor analysis (based on the sample size) (Lock and Seele, 2015). Where acceptable reliability and construct coherence are demonstrated, composite means will be calculated.

To test the hypothesis that specificity, certification and verification are able to predict credibility, it will be examined using Pearson correlations and multiple regressions while

controlling for relevant demographics and shopping frequency. Then, using regression, credibility will be tested to see if it can predict trust (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). A bootstrapped indirect-effect analysis will be conducted to determine if claim characteristics' effect is mediated by credibility, and a centred interaction term or PROCESS model moderation will be utilised to assess if scepticism alters the credibility-trust relationship. Assumptions for linearity, residual normality, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity and influential cases will be assessed. Significance testing will be accompanied by effect size, confidence intervals and limitations; and causation will not be inferred from cross-sectional data.

## 9. Gantt Chart

| Activity                          | W1 | W2 | W3 | W4 | W5 | W6 | W7 | W8 |
|-----------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Proposal refinement               |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Ethics application and approval   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Literature review                 |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Questionnaire development         |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Pilot testing and revision        |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Data collection                   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Data cleaning                     |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Statistical analysis              |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Chapter drafting                  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Revision and supervisor feedback  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| Proofreading and final submission |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |

## 10. Ethical Considerations

Data will be collected only after approval by the university for ethics. The participant information page will provide all the information about the reason for the study, who can

participate, what to expect, what the data will be used for, the length of time it will take, who to contact, and the complaint process (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). There will be informed consent, and it will be that each person agrees to submit. It will be voluntary, and a person may leave before submitting the work. No names, email addresses, specific addresses, monetary information or other sensitive information will be asked for.

Data will be kept on University-approved, password-protected data systems only made accessible by the researcher and supervisor, for as long as deemed necessary, then destroyed securely (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). Withdrawal is possible before submission, and it will not be possible after submission as the responses cannot be identified and this will be notified in advance.

## **11. Limitations, Contribution, and Scope Decision**

The sample may be skewed towards younger, educated or environmentally conscious consumers who are more likely to attend and volunteer for the convenience/purpose of snowball recruitment, thus potentially reducing generalisability (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). There is also a potential recall bias, social desirability bias, and common method bias in the self-report data, and causality cannot be determined from the cross-sectional data. Claim examples may not adequately illustrate shopping contexts where customer price, brand, appearance and quality are neglected. These risks will be minimised with neutral wording, established scales, piloting, quality checks, controls and cautious interpretation.

The research will be based only on the consumers' perception; there will be no analysis of the contents of the package and no verification of claims. This boundary helps to keep methodological consistency, since all the objectives and research questions can be answered by the questionnaire (Ragab and Arisha, 2017). The study offers a uniquely UK-specific, integrated explanation of complexities at play in the relationship between claim design, credibility, scepticism and trust. The results could clear up supermarket communication and inform regulators about factors on which consumers base their credibility assessment. The conclusions will have to do with believability and not truth within the environment.

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