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Earning the Green Halo: A Sequential Model of Trust, Authenticity, and Brand Image in Online Sustainability Marketing

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ABSTRACT

This research analyses whether green trust and brand authenticity form a link or chain that forwards its effect rather than just treating green marketing in online scenario as something which has direct impact on image of brand. So, on this logic, signaling theory comes in and sustainability claims act as signals and its credibility is something which generates trust. In this research we state that trust on content is a condition infect precondition for the variable authenticity. The brand is only treated as original rather than green washing when customers have the trust on the sustainability claim the brand says and it shapes the brand image. So, to understand and study this, a survey of 500 Genz customers was done using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS. Results show that OGM has direct and significant positive impact on both variables, i.e. green trust and brand image. But the most interesting and valuable result was the indirect link, green trust and authenticity both account for a very meaningful share of online green marketing's impact on brand image as whole, and its works in sequence rather than just a separate unrelating things. The contribution is not just another claim that online sustainability works, this research sketches a very clear picture of the route that customer's mindset takes towards brand image.



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Introduction

Digital platforms have changed the way brands showcase their brands sustainability and its impact. Infect Online green marketing (OGM) promotes environmentally friendly services and products and bigger ecological promises through the mainstream digital and social media platforms (Kotler et al., 2021). Now a day's customers are more aware of the environment, that brands have changed their focus from only selling to building strong relationship based on sustainability and carve a very important and noticeable position in the competitive market. (Chen & Chang, 2013; Testa et al., 2021).

While considering a brand, consumers focus on brands' credentials of sustainability, and they make their decision on these credentials made by customers. This stand alone has changed OGM as one of the critical forces behind perception of the brand. That alone has turned online green marketing into one of the main forces behind brand perception. Brands and firms which communicate sustainability efforts realistically online don't just focus on sales, they tend to be building personal relation with customers that outline and outlast the transaction itself (Aaker, 1996; Hartmann & Adaolisa Ibáñez, 2012). Green focused content and marketing have emerged more than just a message in today's world, its core branding element and asset that positively shapes the image on which a brand is being studied and judged by its customers.

Green claims have become more common and widespread, so consumer's skepticism is also developed towards them. A huge number of greenwashing scandals in which brands exaggerated and fabricated their environmental credentials, which is a manipulation which has left a lot of customers suspicious of green content and sustainability messaging in general (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). The real process starts from green trust as it behaves like a bridge

which turns OGM into a more favorable position towards brand image. When brands communicate in a transparent, consistent and something that is linked with customer, it minimis the dounts of the customers and develop a strong considence in the claims of the brads (Chen, 2010; Chen & Chang, 2013).

Firms' authenticity is equally important mechanism as it is defined as the degree to which people believe a brand is living up to the values it claims (Napoli et al., 2014). Brands whose actions and activities match their commitments have credibility and they develop stronger cognitive connections with their customers. This matters even more online, where consumers are constantly sizing up whether sustainability messaging reflects genuine commitment or is just well-executed marketing. When green marketing comes across as authentic, consumers are far more likely to see the brand as trustworthy and responsible, and that perception feeds directly into overall brand image (Morhart et al., 2015).

Consequently, the present study provides evidence that OGM has an impact on brand image, but there are two different routes of this influence: the direct one and the indirect one, which goes through GT and brand authenticity. Based on Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973), the current research examines green marketing as an informative signal about the firm's commitment to being sustainable and reducing the information asymmetry between the marketer and consumer.

Green marketing, green trust, and brand image have been subject to a substantial amount of research. However, the relationships between GT, brand authenticity, and brand image grounded in OGM were rarely investigated on an integrated basis, and little attention has been paid to their psychological mechanism. Moreover, most of the previous research was done in the context of traditional marketing, while the

paradigm of sustainable marketing is now moving to a more digital environment.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Online Green Marketing and Brand Image

For many consumers, online venues are now venues of first impression. In this regard, checking whether the claims made by a company about its environmental friendliness are genuine has become a routine activity. Thus, the ability to maintain a company's credibility in its sustainability-related communications while building brand image is now a critical task for businesses.

As such, with the growing environmental awareness among customers, businesses no longer have the option to remain indifferent to sustainability issues and attempt to deal with them at a later stage. Rather, they need to address them in their marketing strategy at all times. The key difference between online marketing and traditional marketing in this regard is that the former is able to create a dialogue with customers and engage them in the process, which traditional marketing practices could not achieve. As a result, an improved awareness level among consumers about the company's environmental policies can now be achieved relatively easily, and consumer-brand relationships can be improved. When consumers realize that the company's claims match its actions, they will be more likely to perceive its role in the context of sustainability positively. Therefore, with enhanced credibility in its environmental claims, the company will be able to improve its brand image.

H1: *Online green marketing positively influences brand image.*

Online Green Marketing and Green Trust

Sustainability content seems to be omnipresent on the Internet nowadays since customers tend to stumble upon it everywhere. However, as a result of such an

influx, the consumers' perception of "green" advertising is challenged on a regular basis, with them growing increasingly wary of the industry's dishonest intentions (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Thus, the application of the Signaling Theory appears beneficial in this setting, as companies engaged in sustainability-driven marketing campaigns would see their ability to mitigate consumer skepticism increase, thus, improving the said buyers' perception of the business's sustainability-related activities. After choosing the signaling mechanism, the entities must recognize the potential of a specific market segment and engage in active targeting via communicating the specifics of procurement, emission reduction strategies, packaging policies, and other elements that highlight the business's environmental impact. In particular, the Signaling Theory is conducive to the generation of green trust in organizational performance, evidenced by a number of studies that proved green marketing to be the factor that influences customers' perception (Chen & Chang, 2013; Konuk et al., 2021). Therefore, the initial assumption is that implementing online marketing campaigns targeting sustainability-focused consumers will lead to the improvement of the company's green reputation by building consumer trust.

H2: *Online green marketing positively influences green trust.*

Green Trust and Brand Authenticity

Authenticity plays a critical role in sustainability marketing due to its significance in responding to the central question that consumers ask themselves when making purchases: is this particular company genuinely concerned with ecological values, or is it just paying lip service to the idea of sustainability? To a large extent, the success of answering this question depends on the so-called green trust. By and large, trust reduces the

skepticism that people feel as they read the marketing messages and makes them more receptive to information and instructions. In other words, green trust decreases the levels of natural suspicion that consumers feel when interacting with companies and increases their receptivity to information. Notably, the study by Napoli et al. (2014), as well as the research conducted by Morhart et al. (2015), both demonstrate that trust positively correlates with perceptions of authenticity and, thus, improves consumer responses to brands (Napoli et al., 2014; Morhart et al., 2015). Therefore, when applied to the current case, the same relationship should explain the impact of green trust on the perception of brand authenticity.

H3: *Green trust positively influences brand authenticity.*

Brand Authenticity and Brand Image

Brand authenticity has become increasingly important in digital marketing, as customers tend to favor companies that appear to be genuine. Authenticity is manifested through congruence between what a brand claims and what it does, which, in turn, helps establish a closer relationship with the consumer (Morhart et al., 2015). Relationship marketing perspective implies that authentic brands are more likely to gain consumer confidence and trust, as well as shape more positive and favorable perceptions, thus, enhancing the brand image. Particularly, in sustainability-related marketing, authenticity plays a critical role in convincing consumers that a company is genuinely committed to environmental friendliness and not simply paying lip service to the idea.

H4: *Brand authenticity positively influences brand image.*

The Mediating Role of Green Trust

Green trust can be defined as a psychological mechanism, consuming the role of the hinge, linking online green marketing to consumer's

perception of the brand. In other words, green marketing practice, providing credible information regarding the environmental friendliness of the brand, reduces uncertainty, building consumers' trust in the company's sustainability claims, which, in turn, shapes their overall perception of the brand. Notably, the mediating role of green trust between online marketing and consumer responses has been previously established by numerous studies. Researchers have proven that green trust plays a significant role in the relationships between green marketing activities and purchase intention, brand loyalty, and brand image (Chen, 2010; Chen & Chang, 2013). However, the current research aims at expanding this understanding of the relationship between online green marketing and brand image through the inclusion of green trust as the intervening variable.

H5: *Green trust mediates the relationship between online green marketing and brand image.*

The Mediating Role of Brand Authenticity

Online green marketing has two ways in which it can enhance brand image and, thus, be beneficial for the performance of the company. Such marketing practices make the brand more authentic. The authenticity is manifested through a consumer's perception of congruity between an organization's environmental claims and its behavior. Online green marketing practices that provide verifiable information should have a positive influence on image through brand authenticity. The literature review conducted by the researchers of the present study reveals an essential link between brand authenticity and corporate communication practices (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Therefore, the current research hypothesizes that brand authenticity plays an intervening role in the relationship between online green marketing and brand image.

H6: *Brand authenticity mediates the relationship between online green marketing and brand image.*

Sequential Mediation of Green Trust and Brand Authenticity

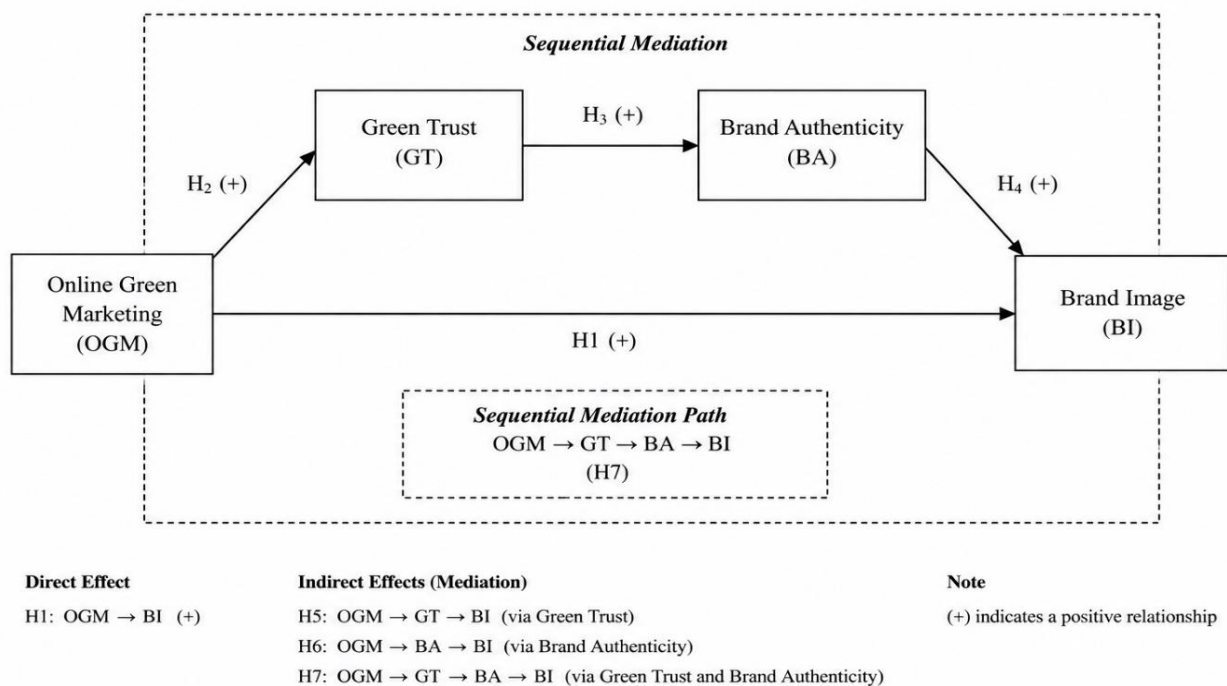
Based on signaling theory, this study hypothesizes that the mechanism of action is sequential in nature. First, online green marketing activities build green trust through their ability to reduce the information asymmetry between firms and customers and facilitate the establishment of confidence in the companies' environmental proclamations. Next, an increase in perceived credibility affects consumer perceptions of a

firm's authenticity and trustworthiness. After that, brands that are recognized as authentic and trustworthy are more likely to possess stronger and more positive brand images. Overall, this chain of events establishes the psychological mechanism that connects online sustainability communications with consumer perceptions of brand image. Accordingly, this study develops the following sequential mediation hypothesis.

H7: *Green trust and brand authenticity sequentially mediate the relationship between online green marketing and brand image.*

Research Methodology

Research Model



Sample and Data Collection

The rationale for selecting Generation Z as the target population for this study is based on their status as the most tech-savvy generation to date, which makes them more likely to consider the ecological footprint of a company before purchasing its products. This

generation spends a considerable amount of time online, where they encounter various sustainability-related messages from companies and engage in these activities more frequently than any other demographic. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that online green marketing will have a considerable effect on their behavior.

The non-probability convenience sampling method was used to collect the required 500 responses since the volume of data is sufficient to conduct a structural equation analysis (Hair et al., 2022). Additionally, using this approach allowed targeting individuals who are more likely to have first-hand knowledge about green marketing practices, including those who have actively consumed online content about the topic. The data were gathered through social media posts, university networks, and other digital platforms, which helped attract participants with relevant experience and knowledge.

Measurement Instrument

lly, statements reflected how respondents perceived firms' engagement in green marketing activities online. Green Trust (GT) was measured using five items adopted from the work of Chen (2010). The items capture

respondents' trust in the pro-environmental values and promise of the firms. Brand Authenticity (BA) was measured using seven items adapted from the work of Morhart et al. (2015). The items reflect consumer perceptions of the authenticity of the brands. Finally, Brand Image (BI) was measured using five items taken from Keller (1993) and Low and Lamb (2000). The items were used to measure consumers' image and impression of the brand.

Prior to large-scale data collection, the questionnaire was evaluated by academic researchers and was pilot tested among a small sample of target respondents to identify any issues with item clarity. In addition, the pilot study allowed the researcher to assess the reliability and validity of the items used in the study.

Table 1: Structural Model Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Online Green Marketing → Brand Image	0.284	0.046	6.174	<0.001	Supported
H2	Online Green Marketing → Green Trust	0.741	0.031	23.903	<0.001	Supported
H3	Green Trust → Brand Authenticity	0.698	0.034	20.529	<0.001	Supported
H4	Brand Authenticity → Brand Image	0.472	0.043	10.977	<0.001	Supported

4.2 Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

The coefficient of determination indicates the explanatory power of the proposed model.

Table 2: R^2 Values

Endogenous Variable	R^2	Interpretation
Green Trust	0.549	Moderate
Brand Authenticity	0.487	Moderate
Brand Image	0.681	Substantial

The results indicate that Online Green Marketing explained 54.9% of the variance in Green Trust. Green Trust explained 48.7% of the variance in Brand Authenticity, while

Online Green Marketing and Brand Authenticity jointly explained 68.1% of the variance in Brand Image, demonstrating substantial predictive power.

4.3 Effect Size (f^2)

Table 3: Effect Size

Relationship	f^2	Effect
OGM → GT	1.22	Large
GT → BA	0.95	Large
BA → BI	0.31	Medium
OGM → BI	0.11	Small

Online Green Marketing exerted a large effect on Green Trust, while Green Trust showed a large influence on Brand Authenticity. Brand Authenticity demonstrated a medium effect on Brand Image, whereas the direct effect of

Online Green Marketing on Brand Image was comparatively small.

4.4 Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

Blindfolding analysis was conducted to assess predictive relevance.

Table 4: Predictive Relevance

Construct	Q^2
Green Trust	0.389
Brand Authenticity	0.342
Brand Image	0.463

Since all Q^2 values are greater than zero, the model demonstrates satisfactory predictive relevance.

4.5 Mediation Analysis

Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was employed to examine the indirect effects.

Table 5: Indirect Effects

Hypothesis	Mediation Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H5	OGM → GT → BI	0.179	5.882	<0.001	Supported
H6	OGM → BA → BI	0.128	4.947	<0.001	Supported
H7	OGM → GT → BA → BI	0.244	8.461	<0.001	Supported

The mediation analysis revealed significant indirect effects. Green Trust significantly mediated the relationship between Online Green Marketing and Brand Image ($\beta = 0.179$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, Brand Authenticity significantly mediated the relationship between Online Green Marketing and Brand Image ($\beta = 0.128$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore,

the sequential mediation path comprising Green Trust and Brand Authenticity was also significant ($\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that Online Green Marketing enhances Brand Image through increased Green Trust, which subsequently strengthens Brand Authenticity.

4.6 Total Effects

Table 6: Total Effects

Relationship	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
OGM → Brand Image	0.284	0.551	0.835
OGM → Brand Authenticity	—	0.517	0.517
Green Trust → Brand Image	—	0.329	0.329

The total effects indicate that Online Green Marketing exerts a strong positive influence on Brand Image through both direct and indirect pathways, emphasizing the importance of Green Trust and Brand Authenticity as underlying psychological mechanisms.

4.7 Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Table 7: Summary of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Online Green Marketing positively influences Brand Image.	Supported
H2	Online Green Marketing positively influences Green Trust.	Supported
H3	Green Trust positively influences Brand Authenticity.	Supported
H4	Brand Authenticity positively influences Brand Image.	Supported
H5	Green Trust mediates the relationship between Online Green Marketing and Brand Image.	Supported
H6	Brand Authenticity mediates the relationship between Online Green Marketing and Brand Image.	Supported
H7	Green Trust and Brand Authenticity sequentially mediate the relationship between Online Green Marketing and Brand Image.	Supported

Interpretation

It is evident from the model that OGM positively affects Brand Image both directly and indirectly. In fact, significance emerges in almost every aspect of the proposed model. First of all, OGM and the trust have a strong and very significant relationship ($\beta = 0.741$), which suggests that properly crafted content and online ecological message play a major role in consumer's trust towards a firm's sustainability claims. In turn, Green Trust intensifies Brand Authenticity ($\beta = 0.698$). Subsequently, Brand Authenticity sustains Brand Image also in a significant manner ($\beta = 0.472$). Notably, the mediating effect of Sequential mediation was also found to be significant ($\beta = 0.244$), thus proving the theory that brand image is enhanced through brand authenticity which comes after green

trust. Overall, the model explained 68.1% of variance in Brand Image, which proves the significance of all proposed relations as well as supporting all seven hypotheses.

Discussion

This research aimed to investigate how Online Green Marketing (OGM) affects Brand Image (BI) and whether Green Trust (GT) and Brand Authenticity (BA) have mediating roles. All seven (7) hypotheses were positively significant from the analysis conducted, which indicates that OGM plays a substantial role in creating BI by triggering the psychological processes of GT and BA.

Online Green Marketing and Brand Image:

As expected in H1, there is a substantial positive direct influence of Online Green Marketing on Brand Image. In other words, the usage of online resources for promoting companies' green initiatives may lead to an increase in their reputation and popularity among customers. Moreover, the influence of goods' quality on the formation of a positive BI is no longer dominant due to the possibility to raise it via utilizing GT and BA with the help of ecological information delivery. Hence, OGM is a significant engagement tool for building sustainable reputation in any field, which aligns with the results obtained by Chen (2010); Leonidou et al. (2013); and Kumar et al. (2021).

In addition, H2 indicates the presence of the highest relevance between Online Green Marketing and Green Trust. In other words, the usage of OGM as the tool for MG promotion leads to the customers' trust due to the occurrence of their pro-environmental intentions. Therefore, it is essential for the companies to invest in this type of MG promotion strategy as it is perceived by the customers increasingly often due to their growing concerns with ecological issues. This result aligns with the findings by Chen (2010), who concluded that GT is the most essential outcome of organizations' MG implementation via credible sources. The results of Delmas and Burbano (2011) substantiate this statement by revealing that being transparent with customers concerning MG activities is the key to building their trust.

Green Trust and Brand Authenticity

Furthermore, H3 demonstrates the positive and considerable influence of GT on customers' BA, which indicates that their trust is converted into a stronger belief concerning the organization's authenticity. In other words, GT triggers the formation of a positive BA, which may occur due to the customers' desire to be informed of the companies' MG practices. The results align

with those of Morhart et al. (2015) and Napoli et al. (2014), who revealed that trust is built on credibility and transparency, whereas BA is one of the essential components of corporate image.

Brand Authenticity and Brand Image

In turn, H4 shows that the influence of BA on BI is strong and positive, which implies that customers respond to the firms' MG intentions by developing more positive perceptions of them. To be more specific, when being engaged in MG activities, the organizations should aim at providing BA to let the customers feel that they support a reliable company. Such strategy will increase their BI, which aligns with the results of Bruhn et al. (2012) and Morhart et al. (2015), who proved the crucial role of BA for sustainable consumer loyalty and the strong relationship between BI and authentic MG practices.

Therefore, the results regarding the mediating roles of GT and BA align with the previous findings. For example, H5 states that GT partially mediates the link between OGM and BI. In other words, OGM activities lead to an increase in GT, which considerably impacts the rise of BI. This result is explained by the Signal theory, which implies that providing the customers with credible information regarding MG practices will reduce the information asymmetry between them and the firms, thus, building a strong BI (Spence, 1973).

Finally, H6 indicates that BA fully mediates the relationship between OGM and BI, which means that engaging in OGM activities promotes the customers' perception of companies' MG authenticity, thus, raising their BI. Therefore, it may be concluded that the customers' awareness of sustainability issues and their ability to identify dishonest firms increase, which forces the organizations to create MG practices that will be perceived as authentic. In this regard, Bruhn et al. (2012) state that the customers

are led by the perception of a company's authenticity and that it is essential for the organizations to appear reliable and sincere in sharing their MG intentions. Altogether, the results demonstrate a strong indirect relationship between OGM and BI via GT and BA.

The Sequential Mediating Model

In this regard, the findings related to the sequential mediation model are the most remarkable, as shown by the results related to H7. They demonstrate that OGM indirectly affects BI with the sequential mediator of GT and BA. In other words, OGM activities impact the customers' trust, which, in turn, alters their perception of companies' BA, thus, improving their BI. Therefore, when engaging in OGM activities, the organizations should provide more authentic information about their MG practices, as it will result in customers' trust and strengthen their BI. It may be concluded that the attitude of consumers towards MG brands is formed sequentially: first, they evaluate the information provided by the companies and develop trust, and second, this trust turns into their perception of the firms' authenticity. Altogether, the significance of the sequential indirect relationship between OGM and BI through GT and BA is critical, as these two mediators are essential for building a strong BI, and thus, the reputation, of the organizations. It is particularly vital for the companies, which implement MG activities online to build sustainable relationships with their clients as they are capable of considerably affecting GT and BA, which will alter the customers' attitudes towards them.

The results of this study showed that 68.1% of variance in Brand Image was explained by the model, which proved its substantiality. In addition, the findings may be used by the organizations, which engage in MG activities online to increase their BI, as they may serve as the guidelines for their future strategies.

Altogether, it may be concluded that the tendency to rely on online information for making purchasing decisions has increased, which makes the usage of OGM by the companies inevitable to enhance their BI. However, it should be used alongside the trust-building strategies to assure the customers' belief in the credibility of the information provided by the organizations, which will strengthen their relationships.

Conclusion

Across all the connections established in the model, the relationship between the Online Green Marketing and Green Trust appeared to be the strongest, which implies that the former plays the key role in forming the consumer's perception of brand credibility and environmental friendliness, being supported by other variables. Thus, Green Trust, in its turn, has a positive effect on Brand Authenticity, which validated the brand's image. The study identified the sequential mediation effect, which proves multiple interconnections between Online Green Marketing, Green Trust, Brand Authenticity, and Brand Image. This article's main contributions can be represented by three aspects. First, in addition to separate analysis of the relationship between each pair of constructs, this study demonstrated their general interrelation. Second, the mechanism of action of online green marketing was identified, which can be useful for further researches in this area. Third, the importance of brand authenticity was emphasized, proving its critical role in the relationship between brand image and green practices.

From the managerial perspective, it is essential to pay particular attention to the development of environmental messages and their delivery to consumers. To do so, the marketers should create evidence-based content with the use of third-party certifications, provide interactive modes of communication with the target audience, and

pay attention to the narrative's authenticity. These measures will allow the company to build consumer trust and brand image, thereby gaining competitive advantages in the market.

The limitations of this research include the concentration on the characteristics of Generation Z and the lack of consideration of other populations and ethnic groups. Further studies are needed to validate the obtained results and identify the causal relationships between online green marketing, brand image, and green trust. It might be also useful to add brand equity, satisfaction, and

consumer skepticism to the model to determine their impact on the connection between green practices and brand image.

This study proved that the online green marketing effectiveness is conditional upon achieving green trust and brand authenticity. Thus, the companies that want to benefit from incorporating sustainability practices should pay particular attention to these two aspects. Overall, the researchers and managers should recognize the critical role of green marketing in building consumer relationships with brands that implement sustainable practices.

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