




Review

Building trust in sustainable brands: Revisiting perceived value, satisfaction, customer service, and brand image

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ABSTRACT

This study revisits the key variables that build brand trust in consumers, addressing a critical issue for building lasting relationships between brands and consumers. Through a conceptual model, we examine how perceived value, satisfaction, customer service, and brand image influence consumer trust. The research is based on a sample of 1280 Spanish consumers over the age of 18, who responded to a questionnaire designed with previously validated scales. The PLS-SEM technique was used to validate the hypotheses and the proposed model.

The findings reveal that perceived value, satisfaction, customer service, and brand image have a positive and significant effect on consumer trust. In particular, it was found that customer service directly influences customer satisfaction, which in turn reinforces brand trust. Additionally, the brand's communication strategy shows a significant positive relationship with brand image. Finally, customer satisfaction is identified as a mediating variable in the relationship between customer service and trust, indicating that a positive experience with customer service is fundamental for consolidating brand trust.

This study contributes to enhancing the understanding of the factors that promote brand trust and offers practical implications for the development of effective marketing and brand management strategies. These insights can be especially relevant for sustainable brands, as the identified factors—perceived value, satisfaction, customer service, and brand image—are also critical in fostering trust in brands that prioritize sustainability. Incorporating sustainable practices into these areas may further strengthen consumer trust and loyalty toward sustainable brands.

Introduction

In today's competitive landscape, brands strive to distinguish themselves both through the quality of their products and through their ability to build and maintain consumer trust. Brand trust has become a crucial intangible asset for fostering long-lasting relationships with consumers, who increasingly value factors such as satisfaction, perceived value, customer service, brand image, and sustainability practices in their purchasing decisions (Gurviev & Korchia, 2003; Huang & Cai, 2015). Sustainable business practices that encompass environmental, social, and economic dimensions not only improve customer retention but also create a competitive advantage by fostering trust and brand loyalty (Agu, 2024), improve green marketing campaigns (i.e. Apaza-Panca et al., 2024) and, finally, affect financial performance (Lee & Suh, 2022). However, despite its importance, questions remain about which variables are most effective in strengthening this trust and how

they interact to influence consumer behavior.

Existing literature has extensively studied the relationship between perceived value and brand trust. Bigné et al. (2000) and Gale (1994) emphasize that perceived value—understood as the consumer's evaluation when comparing the benefits obtained with the costs incurred—is fundamental for differentiating in a saturated market. Additionally, studies by Brady et al. (2005), Lu et al. (2011) have shown that perceived value not only affects customer satisfaction but also has a direct impact on the trust placed in the brand, especially in the context of green brands and sustainability perceptions. Lin (2022) notes that innovation in green brands and perceived value play a critical role in enhancing the green brand image, strengthening customers' perception of sustainability. Despite these findings, there is a gap in understanding how perceived value interacts with other variables such as customer service, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and brand image to influence trust.

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In this regard, customer satisfaction has been identified as a key variable influencing brand trust and loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009; Mollillo et al., 2019). However, the literature still debates the mediating role that satisfaction may play between customer service and brand trust (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2001; Qin et al., 2009). While some authors argue that satisfaction is a direct consequence of good customer service (Murali et al., 2016), others suggest that its impact on trust could be conditioned by additional factors such as perceived value and CSR practices (Sebastián-Morillas et al., 2024). Huo (2022) emphasizes that CSR practices significantly influence trust and loyalty toward the brand, which in turn impact sustainable purchase intentions. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the interaction between these variables.

Another critical aspect that has received insufficient attention in the literature is the influence of brand communication strategy—particularly regarding sustainability and CSR—in building a strong image and how this image, in turn, impacts consumer trust (Villagra et al., 2015, 2021; Thanh et al., 2023). Although effective communication is recognized as essential for strengthening brand image and consumer identification with it, research on how this relationship affects trust remains limited (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Kotler, 2002; Rangel-Pérez et al., 2022). Thanh et al. (2023) highlight that CSR has a notable impact on brand trust and loyalty, which are key factors for the performance of SMEs in emerging markets. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on this relationship and its influence on brand trust.

In sum, despite extensive research on brand trust, a significant gap remains in understanding how the interplay between customer service, perceived value, satisfaction, and brand image shapes consumer trust, particularly in the context of sustainable brands. While previous studies have examined individual factors influencing trust (e.g., Brady et al., 2005; Lu et al., 2011), this study advances the literature by integrating sustainability-driven brand communication as a key element in trust formation. Unlike prior research that has focused primarily on conventional brands, we specifically explore how sustainability-oriented brand communication strategies influence brand image and, subsequently, consumer trust. This approach provides a fresh perspective on trust-building mechanisms, considering the increasing consumer demand for authenticity and ethical responsibility in brands.

Based on the gaps identified in the literature, the objectives of this study are to analyze the relationships between perceived value, customer satisfaction, customer service, brand image, and trust to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that build consumer trust in brands. Specifically, the study aims to explore the mediating role of satisfaction in the relationship between customer service and trust, offering insights into how positive consumer experiences contribute to strengthening trust. Additionally, this research seeks to examine the influence of communication strategies on brand image and, consequently, on consumer trust, emphasizing the potential role of sustainability-oriented messaging in shaping a positive and responsible brand perception. By addressing these objectives, the study contributes to filling critical gaps in the literature regarding trust-building mechanisms in brand management, while providing a framework that can be extended to sustainability-focused practices to meet the evolving expectations of socially conscious consumers.

The research methodology was based on a PLS-SEM analysis applied to a sample of 1280 Spaniards over 18 years old, who completed a questionnaire developed from previously validated scales. This technique allowed for testing the conceptual model and research hypotheses with a high degree of precision and reliability.

The results indicate that perceived value, satisfaction, customer service, CSR practices, and brand image have a positive and significant effect on consumer trust. Furthermore, it was confirmed that brands' customer service is positively related to satisfaction and that communication strategy, especially regarding sustainability initiatives, has a direct impact on brand image. Finally, it was identified that satisfaction acts as a mediating variable in the relationship between customer service and trust, and that CSR initiatives strengthen this mediating effect.

The article is structured as follows: the next section provides a review of the relevant literature and develops the research hypotheses. Subsequently, the methodology used is described, followed by the results of the empirical analysis. Next, the results are discussed in relation to the existing literature, and the theoretical and practical implications are presented. Finally, conclusions are offered, and directions for future research are suggested.

Literature review

Brand trust is a multifaceted concept that has been widely studied in the literature, both as a belief and as an intention (Becerra & Korgaonkar, 2011; Mal & Davies, 2022). First, trust as a belief includes public evaluations of competence and benevolence/integrity, aspects that can be related to both the products and the company itself (Basso & Pizzutti, 2016; Mal et al., 2018). A brand's competence is reflected in the quality and reliability of its products, while benevolence and integrity are manifested in the attention and responsiveness toward consumers, as well as in honest and consistent behavior in communication (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2001; Nikbin et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2021). In the current context, where sustainability is a key value for consumers, demonstrating sustainable and responsible practices enhances the perception of the brand's benevolence and integrity. Trust in the company providing goods or services is reinforced by demonstrating competence and responsibility not only toward consumers but also toward other stakeholders such as employees, business partners, and society in general (Mal et al., 2018; Miquel-Segarra et al., 2023; Ozdemir et al., 2020; Rangel-Pérez et al., 2022; Villagra et al., 2021). Additionally, overall satisfaction with the brand is a key factor that generates trust (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2001), and it has been shown that credibility and corporate competence, especially in sustainable initiatives, facilitate brand trust (Sichtmann, 2007).

Secondly, trust as an intention is defined as the willingness of one party to depend on another in situations characterized by risk and uncertainty (Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight et al., 1998, 2002). This form of trust is commonly operationalized as purchase intention, especially in contexts where the consumer faces decisions with a degree of uncertainty, such as when acquiring a product for the first time (Becerra & Korgaonkar, 2011). In these cases, brand trust is built not only from perceptions of competence and benevolence but also from the alignment of the brand's behavior with consumer expectations, including expectations about sustainable practices and social responsibility (Clemente-Mediavilla & Sebastián-Morillas, 2018).

The literature also highlights the impact of factors such as brand personality, perceived product value, and social bonds on consumer trust toward the brand (Paulssen et al., 2014; Sung & Kim, 2010). For example, dimensions of brand personality like sincerity, ruggedness, and competence significantly influence consumer trust (Sung & Kim, 2010). Likewise, transparency and social responsibility perceived by consumers are determinants in building brand trust (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014; Monfort & Villagra, 2016; Villagra et al., 2021). In an environment where sustainability is increasingly important, companies that integrate sustainable practices and effectively communicate their efforts in corporate social responsibility strengthen transparency and improve the brand's positive perception. Moreover, brand communication plays a crucial role in forming trust, as consistency and honesty in the messages sent reinforce the perception of integrity and competence (Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Kotler, 2002). Brand personality, strengthened through effective communication that highlights its commitment to sustainability, not only improves brand image but also establishes a solid foundation for consumer trust (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Villagra et al., 2021).

Finally, the literature review suggests that both cognitive and affective trust are influenced by corporate competence and brand communication, the latter being moderated by peer influence and similarity to the brand (Ozdemir et al., 2020). Together, these

characteristics and behaviors that reflect ability, benevolence, and integrity at both the product and company level are responsible for building and maintaining brand trust (Mal et al., 2018). However, the growing awareness of sustainability and the new realities in stakeholder relationships demand revisiting the effectiveness of these variables in fostering trust.

Hypothesis development

Essentially, the perceived value of a brand reflects an individual's general perception of the importance of that brand, which is derived from actual interactions with the brand or expected brand usage (Cocosila & Igonor, 2015). Previous studies have widely adopted the concept of perceived value to investigate its impact on trust (Brady et al., 2005; Lu et al., 2011). Furthermore, satisfaction has been shown to be a direct consequence of perceived value, and these two factors significantly affect consumers' future behavioral intentions (Sebastián-Morillas et al., 2024).

From a financial perspective, customer perceived value is the difference between the highest price a customer will pay for a product and the actual cost (Kuo et al., 2009). From a quality perspective, customer perceived value can show the customer's overall evaluation of the product benefits to be received and what is given or sacrificed (Zeithaml, 1988). Also, from a social perspective, perceived value lies in the product's ability to enhance self-concept or social image in the community (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Perceived emotional value is derived from customer interactions with the products offered (Kusumawati et al., 2019). This holistic approach to perceived value underscores its importance in differentiating from competition and improving business performance (Gale, 1994; Monroe, 1990).

Perceived value has a significant influence on brand trust and a key aspect in the relationship between consumers and brands (Chae et al., 2020). This approach is reinforced by studies showing that perceived value acts as a mediating variable between customer service and satisfaction, thus influencing consumer trust (Sebastián-Morillas et al., 2024). Perceived brand value encourages customers to actively engage in brand-supporting activities, which enhances the relationship and strengthens customer-brand identification (Chen et al., 2015). Thus, customer attachment to a brand is strengthened when the brand provides a sense of security, which increases perceived value (Lam & Shankar, 2014) and makes consumers more attracted to brands that share similar values to their own (Lam et al., 2013).

Given that the perceived value of a brand encompasses multiple dimensions, including quality, information relevance, and emotional resonance, it is reasonable to propose that this perceived value positively influences customers' propensity to trust the brand (Gurviez & Korchia, 2003; Huang & Cai, 2015). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H1. Perceived brand value positively influences consumer trust, particularly in the case of sustainable brands.

Customer satisfaction, understood as the affective state of buyers in relation to their overall evaluation of a service experience, is considered a key outcome in building a positive consumer-brand relationship (Papista & Dimitriadis, 2019). Moreover, satisfaction is one of the most widely used factors to assess the quality of consumer-brand relationships (Huang et al., 2022). In this sense, customer satisfaction has been widely recognized as an essential component in building brand trust. Several authors have highlighted that trust has often been explained through customer satisfaction, underlining that the latter is fundamental to generate trust and thus brand loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009; Molinillo et al., 2019).

High levels of satisfaction enhance the relationship with the brand, and foster repeat purchase behavior among consumers, which contributes to the development of a sense of loyalty (Ahrholdt et al., 2017). In fact, Kim et al. (2008) state that satisfaction with a brand is a determining factor in achieving true customer loyalty. Therefore, satisfaction

is not only an indicator of a positive brand experience, but also acts as a catalyst for strengthening consumer trust.

In addition, customer satisfaction plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between customer service and brand trust. Some studies have shown that satisfaction is positively related to loyalty, helping to understand the consumer's desire to maintain long-term relationships with brands (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2001). However, other research suggests that satisfaction is not the only trigger for trust and loyalty (Kumar et al., 2013; Oliver, 1999), indicating the need to consider other variables in this dynamic.

In this context, perceived value plays a fundamental role in the relationship between customer service and satisfaction, reinforcing the importance of a comprehensive approach to customer relationship management (Sebastián-Morillas et al., 2024). According to Treviño and Treviño (2021), customer satisfaction is often a direct consequence of the interaction between customer service and perceived value, suggesting that good customer service, accompanied by high perceived value, can significantly strengthen consumer trust. This view is supported by other studies that have found that high levels of customer service are positively correlated with trust (Qin et al., 2009), reinforcing the idea that satisfaction acts as an essential bridge between these factors.

In summary, the literature suggests that customer satisfaction not only directly influences brand trust, but also plays a mediating role in the relationship between customer service and trust. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a. Satisfaction with the brand positively influences consumer trust.

H2b. Satisfaction mediates the relationship between customer service and consumer trust.

Customer service is an essential component of the customer experience, as it sets the tone and style for the brand-customer relationship. Previous literature has shown that trust, generated through reliable customer service that delivers on its promises, strengthens long-term relationships between consumers and companies (Chiu et al., 2012). This type of service not only improves customer satisfaction, but also contributes to the creation of customer-based brand equity, which in turn increases brand loyalty (Huang & Cai, 2015).

High levels of customer service have been consistently associated with increased customer satisfaction. Sebastián-Morillas et al. (2024) emphasize that good customer service not only improves consumer perception, but also directly increases satisfaction. In fact, recent studies have confirmed that high-quality customer service creates a significant competitive advantage, increasing customer satisfaction and consolidating the relationship with the brand (Silva-Treviño et al., 2021). Moreover, when a company meets customer expectations, it achieves what Murali et al. (2016) call "customer satisfaction," a key state for customer retention and loyalty.

On the other hand, brand trust is defined as the consumer's willingness to have confidence in the brand's ability to fulfill its stated function (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In this context, customer service plays a crucial role in building such trust. Numerous studies have shown that high levels of customer service are positively correlated with consumer trust (Qin et al., 2009). This is because consumers value and perceive customer service positively when they feel that employees of their favorite brands are willing to help them and treat them with respect, which strengthens the perceived trustworthiness of the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In addition, recent studies indicate that satisfaction, which is a consequence of perceived value, is also deeply influenced by the quality of customer service, which further strengthens brand trust (Sebastián-Morillas et al., 2024).

Delivering on promises made to the consumer is another key factor that fosters brand trust (Erdem & Swait, 2004). When brands consistently deliver what they promise, consumers develop a perception of integrity and reliability that strengthens trust in the long run. Therefore,

customer service that not only responds effectively to customer needs, but also reinforces brand promises, is essential to building and maintaining consumer trust and satisfaction.

In conclusion, customer service has a direct and positive impact on consumers' propensity to trust the brand and feel satisfied. This justifies the formulation of the following hypotheses:

H3. Customer service positively influences consumer satisfaction with the brand.

H4. Customer service positively influences consumer trust toward the brand.

Brand image is built through a network of mental associations that consumers and other stakeholders form about the brand, whether positive or negative (Parris & Guzmán, 2022). The brand communication strategy plays a fundamental role in the formation of this image, providing the information and knowledge necessary for consumers to develop attitudes toward the brand (Jeon, 2022). These attitudes, which can be favorable or unfavorable, are formed in the cognitive stage of processing perceived information about the brand (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Once formed, these attitudes can evolve in the affective stage into emotions such as liking, intimacy and attachment to the brand, factors that are determinants of purchase intention (Jeon, 2022).

Effective communication not only conveys the attributes of the brand, but also strengthens its personality, differentiating it in a competitive market and reinforcing brand equity (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Thus, Villagra et al. (2015) highlight the importance of companies maintaining continuous and effective communication with their audiences, using interactive and participatory methods that not only improve the brand image, but also generate a positive impact on society. Consistency and clarity in communication allow consumers to identify with the attributes communicated, which strengthens their relationship with the brand (Monfort et al., 2015). This approach is essential, as brands are one of the most valuable resources for companies, and delivering on the promises communicated is essential to develop trust in the brand (Kotler, 2002).

In parallel, brand image not only reflects consumers' perception of a brand, but also plays a crucial role in building trust. Brand image congruence, both in functional and self-concept terms, is fundamental to strengthen this trust (Kressmann et al., 2006). Functional congruence refers to the extent to which a brand's attributes meet consumer expectations, while self-concept congruence refers to the alignment of the brand with the consumer's self-image. Research has shown that self-concept congruence positively influences trust, attitude, and brand loyalty (Yu et al., 2019).

A positive brand image can significantly boost consumer trust as consumers perceive that the brand consistently meets their expectations and values (Sharma & Jain, 2019). Brands that are authentic and credible, and that stand out in a saturated market, manage to increase consumers' perceived value, which in turn increases brand trust (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Wuestefeld et al., 2012). This relationship between brand image and trust has been extensively studied, and it has been shown that a strong brand image is a crucial factor in building consumer loyalty (Lam & Shankar, 2014).

Taking the above into consideration, it seems pertinent to propose the following hypotheses:

H5. Brand communication strategy, especially regarding sustainability efforts, positively influences brand image.

H6. A positive brand image enhances consumer trust in the brand.

The set of hypotheses put forward allows proposing this theoretical model of trust creation as a whole.

Methods and sample

A questionnaire, based on previously validated scales, was administered to 1521 participants to gather their opinions on the role of large companies and their brands in society. The sample was obtained using stratified random sampling from an online panel managed by a professional research company. The panel participants were selected to reflect the sociodemographic characteristics of the Spanish population, considering age, gender, and geographic distribution. The final sample has a margin of error of 2.51 % at a 95 % confidence interval ($p = q = 0.5$).

The questionnaire used in this study was designed to measure key dimensions related to brand trust, using constructs validated in previous literature. Perceived value was assessed using the Johnson et al. (2006) scale, which measures consumers' perception of the value for money of their favorite brands. Customer satisfaction was measured using the Kuikka and Laukkanen (2012) scale that captures the overall level of satisfaction with preferred brands. For customer service, the scale based on Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and (Ruiz et al., 2014, 2016)c input on responsiveness and respect towards customers was used. Brand communication was assessed using the Şahin et al. (2011) scale, which captures consumers' attitudes toward advertising and promotion of their favorite brands. Brand image was measured using the Martínez-Salinas and Pina-Pérez (2009) scale, which examines the perception of quality, distinctive characteristics and strength in the market. Finally, brand trust was assessed using the Gurviez and Korchia (2003) scale, which includes items on safety, honesty and the commitment of brands to their consumers.

This questionnaire was designed to ensure the validity and reliability of the measures, accurately capturing each key construct according to brand trust theory. All responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree," with reverse coding applied where necessary.

The sample was initially composed of 1521 participants. In the previous analysis of the data, the presence of straight-line response patterns and multivariate outliers (with the Mahalanobis distance) was studied, and 224 records were eliminated. The distribution of the data was also examined, controlling for excessive abnormality by studying skewness and kurtosis, after which a further 17 cases were excluded. The final sample consisted of 1280 cases whose sociodemographic characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Results

SPSS 22 was used to perform the preliminary data analysis and descriptive statistics. To test our conceptual model and research hypotheses, PLS-SEM (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling) was applied using the software SmartPLS 3 (Ringle et al., 2015).

The reliability and validity of the measurement model were examined (Table 2). The individual indicator reliability evaluated through loadings showed values above the heuristic rule of $\lambda \geq 0.707$ in almost all indicators; no item had a λ lower than the minimum limit of 0.4, and three of them had values between 0.4 and 0.7, which were retained since the purification of these indicators did not improve the composite reliability (Hair et al., 2019). Regarding construct reliability, all measures were above 0.7, showing that the constructs have adequate internal consistency; specifically, Cronbach's alpha levels ranged between 0.77 and 0.93, and composite reliability levels ranged between 0.87 and 0.95.

As for convergent validity, it was achieved in all constructs since all presented AVE values above 0.5.

Discriminant validity was examined in two ways. First, according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Table 3), the model shows that, in all cases, the square root of each construct's AVE is greater than the correlations of that construct with the other constructs. Second, according to the HTMT ratio criterion, all values are below 0.85, and the HTMT confidence interval does not include the value 1 in any case (Fig. 1)

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

	n	%
Genre		
Male	635	49.6
Women	645	50.4
Age		
18–24	135	10.6
25–34	194	15.2
35–44	286	22.3
45–54	266	20.8
55–64	222	17.3
65 or more	177	13.8
Level of education		
No formal education	7	0.6
Primary education	35	2.7
Lower Secondary Education (1st Cycle)	90	7.0
Upper Secondary Education (2nd Cycle)	470	36.7
Tertiary Education (1st Cycle)	217	17.0
Bachelor's Degree (2nd Cycle)	274	21.4
Master's Degree (3rd Cycle)	166	13.0
Doctorate Degree (3rd Cycle)	21	1.6
Occupation		
Unemployed	111	8.7
Student	100	7.8
Self-employed	127	9.9
Employee	694	54.2
Homemakerr	68	5.3
Retired	211	16.5
Income level (Mean = €1000)		
Well above average	82	6.4
Above average	548	42.8
Average	284	22.2
Below average	122	9.5
Well below average	63	4.9
No response	181	14.2

Table 2
Measures of individual item reliability, construct reliability, and convergent validity.

Construct	Indicator	Load	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Perceived value	PV1	0.822	0.770	0.867	0.684
	PV2	0.831			
	PV3	0.829			
Satisfaction	S1	0.893	0.900	0.931	0.771
	S2	0.880			
	S3	0.829			
	S4	0.908			
Costumer care	CC1	0.905	0.886	0.929	0.815
	CC2	0.901			
	CC3	0.901			
Brand communication	BC1	0.866	0.934	0.948	0.753
	BC2	0.863			
	BC3	0.875			
	BC4	0.832			
	BC5	0.884			
	BC6	0.885			
Brand image	BI1	0.799	0.858	0.890	0.510
	BI2	0.756			
	BI3	0.403			
	BI4	0.769			
	BI5	0.763			
	BI6	0.753			
	BI7	0.743			
	BI8	0.642			
Trust	T1	0.775	0.894	0.915	0.575
	T2	0.767			
	T3	0.796			
	T4	0.762			
	T5	0.759			
	T6	0.761			
	T7	0.674			
	T8	0.767			

Note: CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted.

Table 3
Discriminant validity according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Brand communication	0.868					
2. Brand image	0.625	0.714				
3. Costumer care	0.489	0.560	0.902			
4. Perceived value	0.360	0.574	0.406	0.827		
Satisfaction	0.522	0.677	0.506	0.617	0.878	
Trust	0.572	0.688	0.554	0.682	0.716	0.759

(Henseler et al., 2015). Therefore, both analyses indicate the discriminant validity of the constructs.

Consequently, the results obtained support the reliability and validity of the measurement model.

The results in Table 3 show that the perceived value, satisfaction, customer service and image of favorite brands have a positive and significant effect on the trust placed in them (H1, H2, H4 and H6). Likewise, brands' customer service has a positive and significant relationship with customer satisfaction (H3) and brands' communication strategy is positively and significantly related to brand image (H5).

Regarding the variance explained in the dependent variables, on the one hand, it was found that brand communication explains 39.1 % of the variance of brand image ($R^2 = 0.391$) and that customer service explains 25.6 % of the variance of satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.256$).

On the other hand, with respect to the dependent variable trust, the model explains 66.2 % of its variance ($R^2 = 0.662$). Calculating the decomposition of the variance of trust, we have obtained that satisfaction explains 21.1 % of the variance of trust, perceived value explains 21.1 %, brand image 15.5 % and customer service 8.5 %. Likewise, the effect size according to Cohen (1988) (f^2), which is the degree to which the exogenous construct contributes to explaining the endogenous construct in terms of R^2 , was 0.161 for perceived value (moderate effect), 0.116 for satisfaction (weak effect), 0.068 for brand image (weak effect) and 0.045 for customer service (weak effect).

Finally, in the relationship between customer service and trust, we obtained that satisfaction acts as a complementary mediating variable (H2b); high levels of customer service directly increase trust, in addition to increasing satisfaction which in turn leads to trust ($\beta = 0.023$).

Discussion

Reflection on the literature

This study contributes to the growing body of research on brand trust by providing a more holistic understanding of how multiple brand-related factors interact to shape consumer perceptions. While past research has recognized the role of perceived value, customer satisfaction, and brand image in influencing trust (Chae et al., 2020; Sebastian-Morillas et al., 2024), our findings introduce sustainability-driven brand communication as a critical determinant of brand image and, ultimately, consumer trust. By positioning brand trust within the broader context of sustainability, this study offers practical insights for companies seeking to strengthen their relationship with consumers through transparent and responsible corporate communication strategies.

The results reinforce existing literature indicating that perceived value is a major driver of consumer trust (Gurviez & Korchia, 2003; Huang & Cai, 2015). Furthermore, they align with the argument that customer satisfaction acts as both a direct influencer of trust (Brakus et al., 2009; Molinillo et al., 2019) and as a mediator between customer service and trust (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2001). This study extends these frameworks by integrating sustainability as a key variable, demonstrating that brand communication, particularly when centered on sustainability, enhances brand image and contributes to trust-building (Villagra et al., 2015, 2021; Thanh et al., 2023).

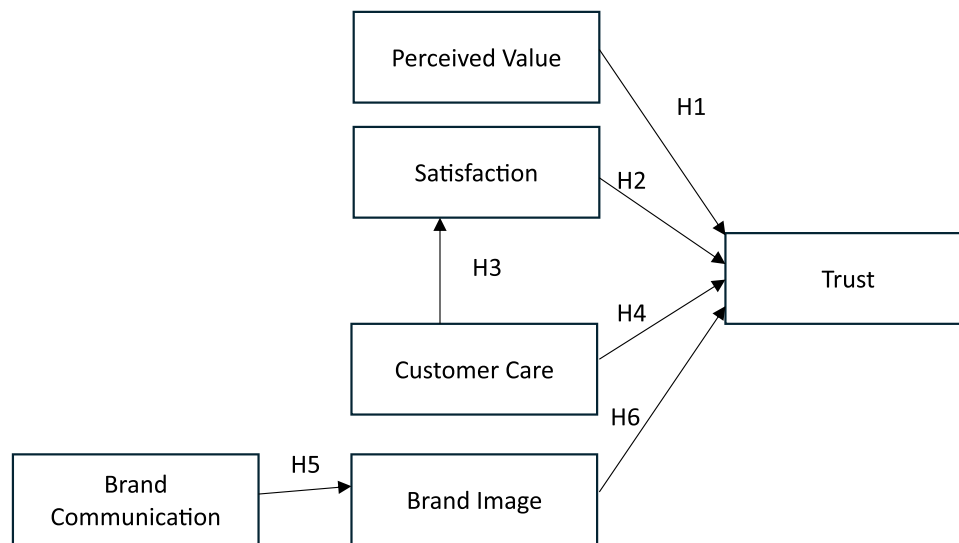


Fig. 1. Theoretical model of trust creation.

Another theoretical contribution of this research is the validation of customer service as a fundamental driver of both satisfaction and trust (Qin et al., 2009; Murali et al., 2016). While previous studies have noted the direct impact of customer service on satisfaction (Sebastian-Morillas et al., 2024), our findings further demonstrate that this relationship is mediated by customer satisfaction, reinforcing the importance of positive consumer experiences in fostering long-term brand loyalty.

Theoretical implications

Our study provides several theoretical contributions to the literature on brand trust and consumer behavior. First, it extends prior models by demonstrating that sustainability-driven brand communication significantly enhances brand image, which, in turn, fosters trust (Huo, 2022; Rangel-Pérez et al., 2022). This highlights the role of corporate responsibility and ethical positioning in trust formation, aligning with prior research emphasizing the impact of sustainability on consumer perceptions (Apaza-Panca et al., 2024).

Second, this research strengthens the argument that satisfaction mediates the relationship between customer service and trust (Murali et al., 2016; Sebastian-Morillas et al., 2024). This underscores the necessity of high-quality customer service not only as a direct influencer of satisfaction but also as a long-term strategy for trust-building.

Third, the findings provide empirical support for the relationship between perceived value and trust, consistent with previous studies (Chae et al., 2020; Gurviez & Korchia, 2003). Nevertheless, our research makes a significant contribution to the field by demonstrating that perception of sustainability further strengthens this relationship, indicating that ethical and eco-friendly business practices contribute positively to consumer trust (Lin, 2022; Thanh et al., 2023).

Practical implications

This study offers several practical implications for brand managers and marketing professionals, particularly those seeking to build consumer trust through sustainability strategies.

First, companies should emphasize sustainability-driven communication strategies to enhance brand image and trust. Our findings confirm that brand communication focused on ethical, environmental, and social responsibility strengthens consumer confidence and brand loyalty (Agu, 2024; Huo, 2022). Marketers should therefore integrate sustainability narratives into their campaigns, ensuring that their messaging is authentic and aligns with consumer expectations (Villagra et al., 2015,

2021).

Second, businesses should prioritize customer satisfaction as a key driver of brand trust. High-quality customer service directly enhances consumer satisfaction, which in turn leads to higher levels of trust (Murali et al., 2016; Sebastian-Morillas et al., 2024). To leverage this relationship, companies must invest in training their customer service teams and ensure that they provide timely and respectful assistance to consumers (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Qin et al., 2009).

Third, brand managers should leverage perceived value as a strategic asset. The results confirm that perceived value significantly influences consumer trust (Brady et al., 2005; Lu et al., 2011; Lin, 2022). Enhancing perceived value through product quality, pricing strategies, and added benefits will help strengthen consumer trust and foster long-term loyalty (Sebastian-Morillas et al., 2024).

Limitations and future research direction

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations that present opportunities for future research. First, the study focuses exclusively on Spanish consumers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Future studies should investigate these relationships in different geographic settings to determine whether the effects of sustainability-driven brand communication on trust are consistent across cultures.

Second, while PLS-SEM provided valuable insights into mediation effects, future research could employ alternative statistical approaches such as PROCESS analysis to further validate the relationships examined in this study.

Third, this study primarily examines consumer trust from a brand-centric perspective. Future research could explore how peer influence and social proof affect brand trust, as previous studies suggest that trust in brands is also influenced by word-of-mouth and social networks.

Conclusion

This study provides new insights into the mechanisms that build consumer trust in brands, particularly in the context of sustainability. The results confirm that perceived value, customer satisfaction, customer service, and brand image all play significant roles in shaping consumer trust. Additionally, sustainability-driven brand communication emerges as a key factor in strengthening brand image and fostering trust.

By integrating sustainability into their communication strategies,

companies can enhance perceived brand value, improve customer satisfaction, and ultimately build stronger relationships with consumers. The mediating role of satisfaction further underscores the importance of positive customer experiences in trust formation.

Future research should expand these findings by exploring cross-cultural perspectives, employing alternative statistical methods, and investigating additional factors such as peer influence in shaping consumer trust. By addressing these areas, scholars can further refine our understanding of trust-building mechanisms and provide more comprehensive insights for brand managers navigating the evolving landscape of consumer expectations. [Tables 4, 5](#)

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Abel Monfort: Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Belén López-Vázquez:** Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Ana Sebastián-Morillas:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

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Table 4
Discriminant validity according to the HTMT ratio criterion.

	Original sample (O)	Sample Measurement (M)	Bias	5.0 %	95.0 %
Brand image -> Brand communication	0.694	0.694	-0.000	0.659	0.726
Costumer care -> Brand communication	0.537	0.537	-0.000	0.493	0.576
Costumer care -> Brand image	0.619	0.619	0.000	0.580	0.655
Perceived value -> Brand communication	0.423	0.423	-0.000	0.364	0.479
Perceived value -> Brand image	0.676	0.676	0.000	0.630	0.718
Perceived value -> Costumer care	0.491	0.490	-0.000	0.436	0.540
Satisfaction -> Brand communication	0.568	0.568	-0.000	0.529	0.607
Satisfaction -> Brand image	0.740	0.740	-0.001	0.707	0.771
Satisfaction -> Costumer care	0.566	0.566	0.000	0.525	0.606
Satisfaction -> Perceived value	0.740	0.740	0.000	0.703	0.775
Trust -> Brand communication	0.625	0.625	-0.000	0.585	0.662
Trust -> Brand image	0.758	0.758	-0.000	0.727	0.786
Trust -> Costumer care	0.622	0.622	0.000	0.583	0.657
Trust -> Perceived value	0.815	0.815	0.000	0.780	0.845
Trust -> Satisfaction	0.790	0.790	0.000	0.765	0.813

Table 5
Evaluation of the structural model.

H	Relation	Path coefficientss	t	p	5 %	95 %
H1	Perceived value → Trust	0.309	11.611	0.000	0.266	0.353
H2a	Satisfaction → Trust	0.295	11.269	0.000	0.251	0.337
H3	Costumer care → Satisfaction	0.506	22.196	0.000	0.469	0.543
H4	Costumer care → Trust	0.153	6.852	0.000	0.116	0.189
H5	Brand communication → Brand image	0.625	32.683	0.000	0.594	0.657
H6	Brand image → Trust	0.226	8.272	0.000	0.182	0.273

Appendix

Perceived value (Johnson et al., 2006)

PV1. My favorite brands offer better value for money than other similar brands.

PV2. I consider my favorite brands to be a better buy than other similar brands.

PV3. For the price they are priced, my favorite brands offer is a better choice than other similar brands.

Satisfaction (Kuikka & Laukkanen, 2012)

S1. I am satisfied with my favorite brands.

S2. Overall, I am satisfied with buying products from my favorite brands.

S3. I am delighted with my favorite brands

S4. I am happy with my favorite brands

Costumer care (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Ruiz et al., 2014, 2016).

CC1. The customer service of my favorite brands responds to customers in a timely manner

CC2. Employees of my favorite brands are willing to help me when I need it

CC3. My favorite brands treat their customers with respect

Brand communication (Şahin et al., 2011).

BC1. I react favorably to the advertising and promotions of my favorite brands

BC2. I have a positive attitude toward the advertising and promotion of my favorite brands

BC3. The advertising and promotion of my favorite brands are good

BC4. The advertising and promotion of my favorite brands work very well

BC5. I am happy with the advertising and promotion that my favorite brands do

BC6. I like the advertising and promotion of my favorite brands.

Brand image (Martínez-Salinas & Pina-Pérez, 2009)

BI1. The products of my favorite brands are of high quality.

BI2. The products of my favorite brands have better features than those of their competitors

BI3. Brands that compete with my favorite brands are usually cheaper.

BI4. My favorite brands are very good

BI5. My favorite brands have a personality that distinguishes them from the rest of the brands.

BI6. My favorite brands do not disappoint their customers

BI7. My favorite brands are among the best in the market

BI8. My favorite brands are very consolidated brands in the market.

Trust (Gurviez & Korchia, 2003)

T1. The products of my favorite brands make me feel confident.

T2. I trust the quality of the products of my favorite brands.

T3. Buying products from my favorite brands is a guarantee.

T4. My favorite brands are honest with their consumers
 T5. My favorite brands are honest with their consumers
 T6. My favorite brands care about their consumers
 T7. I think my favorite brands renew their products to incorporate research advances
 T8. I think my favorite brands always seek to improve their response to consumer needs T9.

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used ChatGPT in order to refine the English language and improve the construction of certain sentences, as well as for stylistic consultations. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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