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“I’m not greening it”: An explorative study of greening strategies
affect on consumers’ brand image

By:

Lovisa Gunnarsson, Orkun Aydin & Rebecca Hitijahubessij

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Heads of master course Strategic Brand Management (BUSN21), part of master program International Marketing and Brand Management.
Lund School of Economics and Management

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***“I’m not greening it”*: An explorative study of greening strategies affect on consumers’ brand image**

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to explore how brands’ greening strategies affect consumers’ green brand image.

Design/Methodology/Approach: This study is based on a qualitative approach, researching one case, McDonald’s greening strategies compared with the consumers’ brand image. The consumers’ brand image was collected with the help of 12 semi-structured interviews.

Findings: The research shows the initial brand image is important when shaping a green one, also that communicating green values and integrating it into their communication strategies is important in order to provide effective information about their greening actions.

Research limitations/Implications: The limitations of this paper include that there was only focus on one case and used a smaller sample size, which provides limited generalization and the findings may not be applicable for other industries. Therefore, future research could research more cases in other industries. Additionally, research how the reputation of the industry the brand operates in affect the green brand image.

Managerial Implications: This research assists as guidance to managers about how to use green strategies effectively to reach the intended green brand image.

Originality/Value: There is much research on brand image, however, this paper explores the green brand image, which has not yet got much academically attention.

Keywords: Green strategies, green branding, green brand image, brand image, McDonald’s

Paper Type: Research paper

Introduction

Brands have become a significant player in today’s society, they are everywhere and serve several valuable functions (Kapferer, 2012). For customers, brands can make product choices simple or be a promise for a certain quality level. For businesses, brands can serve as a marker for the offerings of a firm and act as a competitive advantage, which can lead to financial growth and profitability (Keller, 2006; Urde, 1994). One important aspect of branding is to create a strong brand image in the consumer’s minds; brand image refers to consumer perceptions and encompasses a set of beliefs that consumers have about the brand (Nandan, 2005).

As society and consumers concerns about environmental issues and healthy living are

growing, the need for green solutions has become more important. Hence, there is a pressure of going green to meet the consumers’ concerns, due to this, companies are incorporating more green practices into their business (Akturan, 2018; Danciu, 2015; Tan & Yeap, 2012). Atzori, Shapoval and Murphy (2018) define going green as incorporate sustainable ‘actions, activities, and processes’ to minimize the negative impact from the business on the environment. It has also been found that 66% of global consumers are willing to pay more towards companies who are committed to social and environmental sustainability (Statista, 2016).

Many companies are currently aiming to be “green” and use this in their business strategy. Saxena and Khandelwal (2012) discuss that this is because, companies think by having a

green image, they will have a competitive advantage over those who do not. Therefore, now many new brands start as green brands and older rebrand themselves into becoming more green (Danciu, 2015). However, do these strategies work? According to Kapferer (2012), once a brand image is created, it is stored in the long-term memory. Therefore, it can be hard to reshape consumers' brand image into a greener one.

Previous researchers have explored the fields of brand image and environmental studies, however, regarding researching the customer's green brand image, has got little academic attention (Chen, 2010; Danciu, 2015; Keller, 1993). Therefore, this paper aims to explore how brands' greening strategies affect consumers' green brand image. The research questions to help reach the aim are:

- (1) How do the greening strategies affect consumers' green brand image?
- (2) How does the consumers' perception match the company's intended green brand image?

To gain a deeper understanding about the latter, a case study of McDonald's has been used. Besides, a qualitative approach has been taken to investigate how customers perceive this brand's greening strategies. The paper will first review the existing literature on the concepts of; the greening of brands, brand image, and green brand image. Then, the methodology section will explain the data collection method and the case study that has been used in this research. The results and findings will be analyzed, discussed, and concluded in the last part of the paper.

Literature Review

The meaning of 'green marketing' in relation to sustainability

Brundtland (1987) describes sustainable development as meeting today's need without affecting generations of the future to meet their future needs. One strategy for sustainable growth is green marketing practices, which is the incorporation of environmental dimensions

into marketing activities. Hence, "those that are designed to accomplish the firm's strategic and financial goals in ways that minimize their negative (or enhance their positive) impact on the natural environment" (Leonidou, Katsikeas & Morgan, 2013, p.153). While most focus on recycling and energy conservation, sustainability strategies are addressing; lower emissions, energy efficiency, water conservation, fuel efficiency, package recycling, waste management and economic assistance in developing nations, and efficient transportation of goods (Toops, 2008). Because, when consumers evaluate brand they see the whole corporate image, also included if they are taking environmental responsibility, which then affects their purchase behavior (Saxena & Khandelwal, 2010).

The Greening of brands

As the trend of 'going green' is becoming more important, companies are greening their brands to reach these 'eco-savvy' customers (Sarkar, 2012). "Green branding focuses on the brand reputation for greenness with the consumers [...]" (Cordeiro & Joon, 2013 cited in Danciu, 2015, p.49). Green branding can be described as "the process of creating the unique image of the product in the greener way," meaning not having a negative effect on the environment (Sharma, 2013, p.44). The goal of green branding, like traditional branding, is to increase the number of customers. However, to achieve this the products need to be beneficial beyond the green attributes. Continuing discussing how the growing positive attitude towards green brands, also comes from "the green noise," which makes the consumers confused with the different green terms instead of informing them of the true benefits (Danciu, 2015).

In the literature, green branding has got little academically attention (Danciu, 2015; Grubor & Milovanov, 2017; Hartman, Apoalaza Ibáñez & Forcada Sainz, 2005; Lin, Lobo & Leckie, 2017). Although, Hartman et al. (2005) have researched the green brand positioning, by using functional brand attributes or emotional benefits. Past researchers have also focused on finding the

influencing factors on green brand equity; where green brand image, green satisfaction, and green trust have a positive relationship with green brand equity (Chen, 2010). Lin, Lobo and Leckie (2017) found green benefits and green transparency to have a direct effect on green perceived value, which both had a positive effect on brand loyalty, both direct and indirect, through self-brand connections. Another study of Wang and Horng (2016) contributed to the literature by investigating green brand association by using a network analysis approach.

Greening strategies

When implementing green branding strategies, companies should integrate this in different areas, such as; product production, design, packaging, positioning, and communication with the target market (Grubor & Milovanov, 2017). Danciu (2015) agrees that the green benefits need to be included in the brand's communication strategy, to convince the customer about their green benefits. Further, green branding strategies include taking action towards lower carbon emission, waste reduction, recycling, using environmentally friendly materials, organic products, transparent actions and fair trade (Grubor & Milovanov, 2017). Hu, Parsa and Self (2010) suggest the strategy by; energy efficiency, water efficiency, recycling, sustainable food, being a company with the focus on the so-called 3Rs "reduce, reuse and recycle," and the 2Es, energy and efficiency. Sharma (2013) also discuss how brands are changing their logos to the color green, to appear more sustainable and environmentally friendly. However, an essential base according to Danciu (2015) is, to be honest about the green advantages of the brand and not overestimate these to sound more environmentally friendly. For green brands, Danciu (2015) conclude that ecological and green claims have to be included in the core of the brand and not just in their communication efforts to be the most effective.

One factor which can play a role in the success of green branding strategies is green positioning. These positioning strategies can

be functional or emotional (Sarkar, 2012). Positioning based on functional attributes means to build brand associations through the environmental qualities of the product. The emotional includes to build on through the emotional bond between the customers and the product, making consumers believe they make a difference by purchasing the product (Danciu, 2015). Hartman et al. (2005) found in their study that a combined strategy of functional and emotional positioning had the strongest effect on attitudes. Further, suggesting to have an effective brand strategy "would be a green positioning, centered in the creation of emotional benefits sustained by information on environmentally sound functional attributes" (Hartman et al., 2005, p.21).

The effects of greening

As with most practices, there are some pros and cons. Grubor and Milovanov (2017, p.84) demonstrate by using green brand management in the company's practices, "has the potential to bring together multiple requests between consumers, companies and society, gaining win-win situation." Leonidou, Katsikeas and Morgan (2013) found that greening the marketing programs was beneficial for the company and can be beneficial for their future performance. However, they also found that the industry's environmental reputation which the company operates may have an impact on where the greening investment is most suited. Sharma (2013) found that greener practices would lead to better long-term profits, additionally, by adopting green branding would create a positive green image of the company.

However, there are also some negative or concerns for companies greening activities. Danciu (2015, p.49) argue the reason for green branding practices to fail, is not because the lack of consumer demand, but "because these efforts are superficial, and not grounded in the complexity of the current changes of the market, economy, and society, which end up sending messages that are often the opposite than those intentioned." Consumers tend to be less forgiving to brands with green claims if

they would do something wrong; hence, it is extra important for these brands to fulfill their green brand promises (Danciu, 2015). Besides, Schubert, Kandampully, Solnet and Kralj (2010) argues that restaurants are lacking transparency in communicating the process activities to the customers. The production is mostly being performed in the background, and it is invisible for the customers (Kassinis & Soteriou, 2003).

Another growing concern for the brands who claim to be green is greenwashing. Akturan (2018) claims because of the pressure to be green some companies exaggerate their green activities, making them be involved in greenwashing. Delmas and Burbano (2011, p.65) define greenwashing as “the intersection of two firm’s behaviors: poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance.” Greenwashing has been found to have an adverse effect on brand credibility and brand association and in turn green brand equity and purchase intentions (Akturan, 2018). Therefore, it is important to be aware of what is green and what is greenwashing the brand.

Brand image

To measure the greening strategies from the consumer perspective, brand image will be used. Furthermore, Keller (2009, p.143) discuss brand image as one of the components of brand knowledge, which “all the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, experiences and so on, become linked to the brand in the mind of the consumers,” the other one being brand awareness. He then defines the brand image as “consumers perceptions of and preferences for a brand, as reflected by the various types of brands associations held in consumers’ memory.” According to Zhang (2015), brand image is the key driver of brand equity, discussing that brand image refers to consumer’s general perception and feeling about a brand, and has an influence on consumer behavior. Overall, most researchers agree that brand image is the consumer perception of the brand created in the mind of consumers’ (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2009).

Furthermore, the brand image is seen from the receiver’s side and focuses on the way in which certain groups perceive a product, a brand, a company, or country (Kapferer, 2012). For companies’ brand image is important to be aligned with the company’s vision, in order to minimize ambiguity (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). In addition, Nandan (2005), adds that a communication gap can exist if there is a discrepancy between the sender and the receiver and therefore it is important that the brand message is conveyed clearly. According to Keller (1993), it represents the brand image as the perceptions about a brand, which is reflected by the brand associations consumers have in their memory. Furthermore, Keller (2012) adds that a brand image is hard to change if it is already created in the customer’s mind because it is stored in the long-term memory. The article of Hsieh and Chung (2008), support the latter statement and add that customers who commit a favorable brand image to memory, it can enhance customer loyalty. On the contrary, with an unfavorable brand image, it can conflict with the consumers’ perception about the corporate’ reputation.

Green brand image

Chen (2010) have found the green brand image as one of the three drivers of green brand equity and define it as a set of perceptions of a brand in a consumer’s mind that is linked to environmental commitments and environmental concerns. Several studies have demonstrated that brand image is a essential determinant of customer satisfaction (Chang and Tu, 2005; Chen 2010; Martenson, 2007). The greener the brand image is, the higher the pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment is to satisfy the customer’s environmental desires, sustainable expectations, and green needs (Chen, 2010). However, Mushtaq, Afzal, Khong, Ong and Ng (2017) found that the consumers’ attitudes regarding green products are a positive influencing mediator of the green brand image. Hence, brands need also to build general concern for environmental issues for the consumer.

Brand associations

As earlier discussed, Keller (1993) describes brand associations constructing consumers' brand image. Brand association can be any association linked to the brand in memory, including attributes, benefits, users, packaging, and pricing. The associations mentioned before can be viewed as being organized in a network model which is consistent with the associative network model of memory (Keller, 1993). Elangeswaran and Ragel (2014) discuss how brand associations are deep-rooted in the mind and can both be positive or negative. According to Keller (1993) there are different associations:

Type of brand associations. Brand associations can take different forms and can be classified into three major categories: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. The attributes are the descriptive features of a product, as what a consumer thinks the product or service is and has. The benefits are the personal values that customers attach to the product. In other words, how consumers think the product can do for them. At last, the attitudes are important according to Keller (1993), because they often form the basis for consumer behavior, for example with decision making.

Favorability of brand associations. According to Keller (1993), associations differ according to how favorable the associations are evaluated. This means consumers, believe a brand that has attributes, and benefits can create a positive view of how a brand image has been formed and satisfy the needs and wants.

Strength of brand associations. With strength, Keller (1993) explains that strength, in this context, depends on how the information enters consumer memory, which can be seen as how much a person thinks about the information and how a person thinks about the information. When a person is actively thinking about an attribute, then the brand association will get stronger created into the mind of the person. However, Keller (1993) also stress the fact that brand associations do not have equal importance and strength. Since

different consumers possess different associations and this leads to different brand networks in content and structure. Also, Aggarwal (2004) states that consumers differ not only in how they perceive a brand but also in how they relate to brands.

Uniqueness of brand associations. The last component mentions the uniqueness of the brand association, and this relates to using the association that differentiates itself from the competitors. These differences can be made by the consumer directly, by comparing it with the competitors or it can be highlighted without stating a competitive point of reference.

Methodology

Research method

Research can either take a qualitative, a quantitative, or a mixed approach. Quantitative research focuses more on numbers and the quantification of data; in contrast, qualitative research approach is focused on words and used to understand the underlying reasons for a problem (Bryman & Bell, 2015). To reach the aim of the paper, there will be a qualitative approach as it is to try to understand how consumers' green brand image is affected by the greening of brands.

In order to test how greening strategies, work with the green brand image, one brand has been used as the case of this study. This will be explained more in detail in the case description part. For this McDonald's was used as context topic. This because it is a well-known brand and has changed their brand strategies, to adapt to the 'green' trends (Rayan, 2008; Rinkesh, n.d.; Sampson, 2015).

Primary and secondary data

In this study, multiple methods have been applied to collect data. The data was collected through primary and secondary sources. Primary data refers to information which was collected first hand (Rabianski, 2003). Furthermore, this data was collected from 12 semi-structured interviews. Secondary data is existing information collected from secondary

sources (Rabianski, 2003). For this study, secondary data was used for the case description of McDonald's, to understand their greening efforts. Thus, the secondary data was necessary for testing the primary data regarding the consumers' green brand image.

Data collection

Collection of data can be done in multiple ways, however, in this research semi-structured interviews were used, which are common in qualitative research. One reason was that of its flexibility, hence, it allows the interviewer to use an interview guide as a base, but the interviewer has the opportunity to ask more questions for further discussion (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Additionally, it was used because of providing the opportunity to get deeper understanding, reflection, and explanation of the interviewee's answers, which was essential to meet the aim of the *how* (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

To conduct the interviews an interview guide (see Appendix A) was developed which included open-ended questions that were asked in the interviews, based on the literature and the McDonald's case. Also, the questions were followed up by probing questions to get rich answers, example, 'tell more about this' and 'why?'. Before conducting the interviews, the questions were pre-tested, to see if the questions were in logical order and understandable (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Easterby-Smith et al. (2015, p.144) claim six important practical issues which may influence the result: "obtaining trust; being aware of social interaction; using the appropriate attitude and language; getting access; choosing the location for the interviews; and recording the interviews." These issues were considered when designing and conducting the interviews. Furthermore, when conducting the interviews, the interviewees were ensured their answers were anonymous and that the interviews were recorded for analysis purposes. The interviews were both conducted face-to-face and through the telephone.

Sample

To select the sample to research the perception of consumers, the convenience sampling technique was adopted. Meaning to select the sample units based on the easy accessibility for the researchers (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The sample consisted of millennials, because of the growing numbers of millennials entering the workforce, estimated to occupy 75% of the global workforce by 2025, and strengthening their purchase power, making them a vital generation to study (Catalyst, 2018; Insights, 2018). The millennials or generation Y can be defined as individuals born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2018). Additionally, to be included in the sample the individual had to be familiar with McDonald's.

Regarding the sample size, the theoretical saturation strategy was used, meaning that interviews were conducted until no new information or themes were found (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Based on this the final sample included four males and eight females born between 1996 and 1987, originate from different countries.

Case Description

McDonald's

The fast-food giant McDonald's has been dealing pressures for their environment and health impacts. In the documentary, *Super Size Me*, Morgan Spurlock demonstrates the detrimental health effects of McDonald's products (Singson, 2018). In this context, going green and the fast-food industry may not seem truly compatible. However, McDonald's is one of the players that takes a noticeable place in the greening of brands (Rayan, 2008; Rinkesh, n.d.; Sampson, 2015). Kapferer (2012) distinguish how brand image is on the receiver's side, while the brand identity is on the sender's side. Therefore, to see how consumers' decode McDonald's signals and forming their brand image, one has to look at McDonald's green identity and the green image they want to project. They are

following some significant green strategies both internally and externally, thus, to position McDonald's as being 'green' in the mind of customers.'

McDonald's claim they want to use the size for good, 'scale for good,' "We believe that delicious food can also be sustainable - for our customers, producers and the environment" (Corporate McDonald's [a], n.d.). Bob Langert, vice president of sustainability at McDonald's, explains doing changes to become more green is a large part of their business strategy, by doing they hope to enlist customers as their partners. He also explains by communicating their sustainability efforts and they hope to build brand trust and brand loyalty (Gunther, 2018). In 2008 they decided to change their color of the logo in Europe, from a red to a green background, with the intention to show their environmental efforts (Associated Press, 2009). Hoger Beek, vice chairman of McDonald's, has commented that they want to clarify their responsibility for the preservation of natural resources and will put a more significant effort in the future (Wheeland, 2009).

Reducing greenhouse gas emission is one central part of McDonald's greening strategy. Moreover, by focusing on three primary segments which accountable for 64% of their emissions; "beef production, restaurant energy use and sourcing, packaging and waste" (Corporate McDonald's [c], n.d.). They are involving energy saving technologies including solar power, cogeneration waste heat, and decreasing carbon emission in Japan. Also, in the U.S. they have an agreement to buy their total 30% electricity from American wind power providers (Kaye, 2012).

There have been changes to be more health conscious and also moving away from antibiotics in its chicken, offering an option for vegans, vegetarian food, salads (Morris, 2018), and including fruits and vegetables in their Happy Meals (Maureen, 2012). Regarding the hamburgers, McDonald's works with buying sustainable beef, "we support beef production that's environmentally sound,

protects animal health and welfare, [...] and we have done for over a decade" and the burger includes 100% beef (Corporate McDonald's [b], n.d.). Since the release of the global commitment to sustainable beef in 2014, McDonald's released a Beef sustainable report, which sets out their strategy, aims, and achievements so far. Their beef sustainability work supports the UN Sustainable development goals, a global agenda to protect the planet among other things. In all countries where McDonald's is sourcing beef, they have traceability from the abattoirs through the processing plant and to McDonald's restaurants. (Corporate McDonald's [b], n.d.).

Francesca Debiase, McDonald's sustainability officer, states that using less packaging and packaging waste is a top environmental issue for customers (Golgowski, 2018). McDonald's have worked a long time with sustainable packaging, including reducing packaging, recycling, and have reduced waste with 30% in the last 25 years (Corporate McDonald's [c], n.d.). In 2016, U.S. locations, McDonald's restaurants have started to use new eco-friendly carry-out bags, drink cups, and sandwich boxes (Spigelman Richter, 2016). McDonald's claims they will make packaging 100% green by 2025, which is included renewable, recyclable, and certified materials (Golgowski, 2018). In regard to recycling and sustainability, McDonald's is the first restaurant company to join the How2Recycle, a program within the Sustainable Packaging Coalition (SPC). McDonald's is looking at the on-pack messaging to see which is the most effective way of informing customers about recycling. Besides informing customers, McDonald's also printed the SPC logo, on their paper carryout bag, and other packaging, such as the Happy Meal cartons, plastic McCafé cups, and plastic carryout bags (Corporate McDonald's [c], n.d.)

Altogether, in efforts to be transparent McDonald's share reports on their actions and performance regarding their green efforts (Corporate McDonald's [b], (n.d.). Matt Biespiel, senior director of global marketing is proud of the progress and explains these

innovations as highly crucial for the customers who care about the planet (Richter, 2016).

Empirical Results

In this part of the report, the results from the interviews will be presented. To measure the brand image of the interviewees, questions were asked about their associations and perceptions. The interviewees started by answer more general questions about McDonald's and then went deeper into the green aspects. The interviews revealed McDonald's was one of three restaurants on top of their minds. All the interviewees were very or quite familiar with the McDonald's brand and visited a location somewhat regularly. For most of the interviewees, the brand has been a popular brand for as long as they could remember and often visited during their childhood.

Furthermore, most of the interviewees associated the brand with; fast-food, hamburgers, fries, bad and unhealthy food, but also added that their products are full of preservatives, chemicals and therefore does not have a positive perception about McDonald's. However, the interviewees also mentioned that McDonald's is a very good international company, with a strong brand, and knows who they are, and wants to be. As has been noted, the interviewees had mixed feelings about McDonald's, but overall the feelings were more negative than positive.

Environmental and sustainability

In the following, questions about the environment and sustainability were asked. Here, the researchers want to understand how the respondents perceived these two concepts and how it was associated with the brand. Most answered that overall these concepts were important and how the awareness is increasing. One said both companies and people need to think about how they can contribute to sustainability. Furthermore, one of the critical issues for the interviewees was

how plastic should be avoided, but also recycling, locally produced, and organic food.

When asking about McDonald's as an environmentally responsible and sustainable brand; almost all the interviewees did not perceive McDonald's good in these terms.

R4: "They are doing good things, such as raising money for kids [...], but sustainability... hmm, I don't think that is in their first place, I still think its a lot that can go further, using less plastic, bring more awareness about recycling."

A few of the interviewees answered that they serve much beef and how it is really bad for the environment; one said: R1: *"No, definitely not. Well, the whole thing about [...] what kinda food they serve I mean meat? [...] my perception of environmental friendly are what kinda meat we eat."* Saying that beef is not very environmentally friendly; adding that the interviewee starting to see commercials about vegetarian options, and was suggesting that maybe McDonald's have to start to think of doing this as well. Furthermore, one said they are not using Swedish meat or locally produced food, which is in their opinion not good.

Another perception for some was that McDonald's use much plastics, for example; straws, which are not good for the environment or sustainable. Also, two interviewees elaborated that large companies are in general not sustainable. However, one said that they are sustainable because they are recycling and using paper for their packaging, so from what the interviewee could see the company is doing good on this issue. Moreover, a few answered that they did not know or maybe could not see it.

In comparison with other fast-food restaurants, one said McDonald's is better because they ask if the customer wants the printed receipt and the customer can also choose if wanting a straw or not. Although, some said they were

worse than others, as Max uses sustainable materials and ingredients, and they do not know where McDonald's meat comes from. One added:

R1: "I feel like I'm a little more vicious towards McDonald's than I'm towards Max, but I don't really know why."

However, half of the interviewees answered the fast-food industry is all the same, quite bad. The other half answered that they did not know.

Food quality

In the next part of the interview, questions about the quality of the food were asked. How customers perceive the McDonald's food and what their opinion was regarding the ingredients, sustainability and environmental performance of the brand. The interviewees' general thoughts about McDonald's food options was that it was good and had lots to choose from. Half said it is good that they have vegetarian and vegan food, while the other interviewees thought they did not have enough.

The perception of the food was varied, but most thought it tasted well or has stable quality. However, almost everyone perceived it as unhealthy and including lots of fat. Regarding the ingredients, some answered that they did not think McDonald's ingredients were sustainable or environmentally friendly, only two believed they were.

Again, the meat or the beef were much discussed, some said that beef is not good for the environment and one said she do not know where the meat is from. There was also two of the interviewees who answered, that they do not know how much meat the burgers contain. Although there were some who perceived the beef as sustainable raised and safe, one said:

R4: "I think they are, I know that in Russia [...] for example, if it comes to meat, they purchase the meat from [...] high companies who raise animals in a

very nice condition, kinda... And it's a company who is very transparent with how they grow the animals and how they treat it and they are very very transparent with how they try to make it as much environmentally friendly as possible, and McDonald's purchase the meat from them, which makes me personally feel better."

Waste, recycle and packaging

Next, the respondents were asked about the packaging of the product and what the perception of the packaging was related to sustainability. Four respondents perceived McDonald's packaging as very positive; thinking McDonald's is using reusable and environmental packaging, which they think is quite good. Regarding sustainability, one emphasizes that McDonald's are doing a good job with using paper and being environmentally friendly, the other one says McDonald's is one of the first company caring about the recycling issue.

Others had two perspectives, regarding burger and food they think McDonald's is doing right using carton and paper, concerning environmentally friendly. However, they are not entirely successful about sustainability because of using plastics, which is controversial and can be improved. Additionally, one of the respondent emphasizes that he has a lack of information about the material they use, saying:

R12: "Are material renewable? Or what is the durability of material? These are needed to be discussed and investigated."

The other respondents say they do not think McDonald's are sustainable; one of them especially underlines the use of plastic packages as a crucial problem.

Overall, the perception of recycling performance of McDonald's is mostly positive, thinking the company has good performance. They mostly said that McDonald's has separate baskets for different recycling purposes. However, one of them criticizes these positive recycling practices

depend on the country. Besides, some of the respondents have no clear perception about McDonald's approach. They mainly emphasize that McDonald's does not have advertising and communication about their recycling performance. One of the respondent among the respondents who did not have clear perception said that McDonald's does not have effective and applicable offerings to the customers, so he thinks McDonald's is not impressive and visible about the recycling issue.

Authenticity

In the last part of the interview, questions about authenticity were asked, to understand the perception of the respondents related to the brand. Regarding their perception of trust in the McDonald's brand, some feel because they are a large cooperation and not entirely honest where the food is from, their trust was low or not there. Also, one said:

R5: "So in my way, if they are claiming that they are sustainable and environmentally friendly, I think I would have troubles believing that."

However, some said that they trusted the company, because of them being transparent, giving back to the community, and a well-known brand.

A few of the interviewees perceived McDonald's as genuinely caring about the environment, they were all discussing how they recycle and using paper bags, which is good and that is why they believe their efforts. Some also mention that McDonald's are only acting environmental because they have to adapt to the market and it is trendy.

R6: "I perceive them as caring about money, if they are doing something good for the environment it is also because people requires it [...] it is all about the image."

However, most perceived them as not truly caring about the environment. Some thought they just acted environmentally friendly to maximize profits. One felt like McDonald's

could do more and said: *R1: "I feel like the thought is there but they don't go 100% into it,"* then adding: because there is a lot of question marks as a customer, example, where the food is from. Finally, the others said disagreed because they had not seen any commercial about McDonald's doing something for the environment.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore how brand's greening strategies affect consumer's green brand image, using the McDonald's case study as a tool to help understand and find out if consumer's perception matched with the companies intended green brand image. At the beginning of this paper two research questions were asked to assist the main aim: (1) How do the greening strategies affect consumers' green brand image? Also, (2) How does the consumers' perception match the company's intended green brand image?

The greening of brands is intended to create a green reputation with consumers' (Cordeiro & Joon, 2013 cited in Danciu, 2015). As found in the interviews the environmentally friendly and sustainable issues were important for consumers' and both companies and people need to contribute. However, they did not perceive McDonald's as an environmentally, responsible and sustainable brand. On the other hand, McDonald's want to clarify their responsibility for the preservation of natural resources and are planning to put more effort in the future (Wheeland, 2009); seeing that the consumers' are not in line with what McDonald's intended to portrait.

In the results the food was perceived as unhealthy; Danciu (2015) claims that the products need to be beneficial beyond the green benefits. Hence, the unhealthy aspects of the food take over the green strategies for the beef and other ingredients instead, as the consumers' do not see the product as beneficial from the beginning. The industry which McDonald's is in, is also a problem for them, as the fast-food affect their environmental reputation, for example, the

beef consumption (Leonidou, Katsikeas & Morgan, 2013). However, McDonald's want to project an image of having a sustainable beef commitment, to farmers, the environment, and the customers. This is creating a gap between most of the consumers' green brand image and the intended green image; as the consumers see beef as a not environmental or sustainable. Although, some of the interviewees' image was more aligned regarding the beef and their sustainable beef programs, perceiving McDonald's according to their greening strategies (Corporate McDonald's [b], n.d.).

As described by Grubor and Milovanov (2017) the packaging is an important part to be included in the green branding strategies. Furthermore, this has been integrated with McDonald's greening strategy for a long time. This was one of the areas where McDonald's strategies had shaped some of the interviewees green brand image in a positive manner. Although, still, the consumers' perceived McDonald's as using too much plastic and lacking information about the materials they use. However, McDonald's do work with How2Recycle and have the SPC logo on all their recyclable packaging to emphasize their sustainability (Corporate McDonald's [c], n.d.).

Moreover, consumer perception and McDonald's greening strategies are not always aligned, which can be due to different aspects. One of the reasons for the green strategies not affecting the consumers' green brand image, can be that the consumers saw McDonald's as caring more about the money than the environment. Thus, not perceive them as being genuine, instead being more superficial (Danciu, 2015). Indicating, that there could be a lack of McDonald's greening strategies in the core of the brand. Furthermore, if included, the greening strategies may influence the green brand image more. On the other hand, McDonald's are trying to be 'truthful' and transparent about their green advantage, which is vital according to Danciu (2015).

Another factor can be the green positioning. Currently, McDonald's is taking a more functional position, communicating the functional attributes of their greening. However, to be more successful with their green brand image McDonald's could focus more on the emotional positioning of their strategies, thus, combining the functional and emotional attributes of their greening (Hartman et al., 2005).

Regarding the effects of what the greening strategies have on the interviewees, the results have shown that it affects the interviewees partially. The interviewees noticed that McDonald's is focusing more on recycling and trying to be healthier, however, looking at all the green activities McDonald's is performing, the interviewees were not acquainted with this. Thus, creating a gap between the brand and the consumers. Furthermore, as the consumers' satisfaction with the green performance of McDonald's were low, suggesting their green brand image is weak as well (Chen, 2010). Therefore, the overall vision of McDonald's and the brand image are not aligned, which creates ambiguity (Hatch & Schultz, 2001). Another reason for this can be that the company does not effectively communicate their greening strategies to the consumer, thus, lacking to convince the consumers about their green benefits (Danciu, 2015; Grubor & Milovanov, 2017). This was also found in the results were the interviewees were missing the communication about McDonald's environmental and sustainable efforts. The latter discussion supports Nandan (2005), who states that a communication gap can exist if there is a disparity between the sender and receiver and that it is important that the communication is transferred clearly. This is supported by Danciu (2015) discussion that green claims need to be integrated into the communication strategy. However, companies need to take into account that when communicating, these messages are not exaggerated, which can make the company involved in greenwashing. This can lead to a more negative effect on their brand credibility and brand association (Akturan, 2018).

Conclusion

As being socially responsible and “being and practicing green” for companies is getting more important, this paper's aim was to explore how brands' greening strategies affect consumers' green brand image.

In order to research the consumers' brand image, the McDonald's brand was used as a case. For this context, it can be concluded that McDonald's intended green brand image is not a good match with the consumers' green brand image. This further suggests that the greening strategies were not effective on McDonald's green brand image. However, several indications were found why the greening strategies were not so effective. First, consumers were found to have a more overall negative image of McDonald's and their food, making it hard to change this into a positive manner. Second, the consumers did not see them as truly caring about the environment, leaving them with doubts, regarding McDonald's intentions, which was suggested to be because it is not well integrated into the brand's core. Third and final, the negative reputation of the fast-food industry could be a mediating factor for the greening process.

This study also highlights the missing element of communication, which is supported by Danciu (2015). It is essential for the greening strategies to be integrated into the brand's communication strategy effectively, to bridge the gap between the intended green brand image and the perceived brand image. Implementation of these green strategies is of great importance for the shaping of the green brand image. Meaning, even if the brand applies greening strategies these have to be received by the consumers for them to enhance their green brand image.

Theoretical contributions

The theoretical contributions of this study include how greening has been perceived by customers and analyzed if the perception matched the company's intended brand image. The findings further highlighted the importance of the initial brand image, when

building a green brand image. Adjusting into a green brand image can have a substantial impact on the initial brand image if there is a large gap between them. Additionally, this topic has not got much academically attention, and earlier research has not been focused on studying the greening strategy. Therefore, the findings in this study will serve as a platform to contribute to the future literature.

Managerial contributions

From a managerial perspective, this research assists with guidance on how to use green strategies. The findings show that communicating these green values and integrating it into their communication strategies is important. These findings also support previous research of Danciu (2015) that brands should integrate their greening in their core. This will eventually help create a green brand image that is aligned with the company's vision. This paper also provides indicators which companies can consider when applying green strategies and using this in their core of the brand. Besides, being transparent about being green, using emotional positioning in their strategies and keeping in mind that the initial brand image is important, can help the managers shape their intended green brand image.

Limitations and future research

This paper offers insight into the greening field. However, there are also some limitations for this study which needs to be considered. Firstly, there was only focus on one brand for this study, which provides limited generalization and may not apply to other industries. Secondly, as this was a qualitative study the number of interviews were relatively low as well as only interviewing millennials. Also, different results would occur if interviewing individuals from the same country.

Based on this study, future research could focus on researching the effect of greening strategies using more than one case and performing it in other industries to see if the findings correlate with these research findings.

There would also be a need to research this on a larger sample, to have a more generalizable result. Also, future research could focus more on how the industry reputation affects the green brand image of a brand operating in the industry.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide

1. What year are you born?
2. Where do you come from?
3. Please name some of the fast-food restaurants you have visit.
4. How familiar are you with McDonald's?
5. Have you visit McDonald's? How often? How long ago?
6. Did you visit McDonald's as a child? If yes, how often?
7. What comes in mind when I say McDonald's?
8. How would you describe McDonald's to a friend?
9. What is your perception of McDonald's?
10. What do you associate with McDonald's? Why? positive/negative?
11. How does the McDonald's brand make you feel? Why?

Environmental & sustainable

12. What is your personal feeling regarding sustainability in general?
13. What do you link with the word environmentally friendly?
14. Do you perceive McDonald's as a responsible brand? In terms of environmental issues
15. Do you perceive McDonald's as a sustainable brand? Why?
16. How do you evaluate McDonald's environmental performance compared to other fast-food restaurants? Why?

Food Quality

17. What are your general thoughts about McDonald's food options?
18. How do you perceive McDonalds food?
 - a. How do you perceive the food quality?
 - b. Regarding healthy or not?
 - c. Ingredients Environmentally friendly/Sustainable/organic? why/not?
 - d. How about the Beef? (sustainable beef program)
19. What is your experience with food at McDonald's? Why?

Waste, recycle, packaging

20. How do you perceive McDonald's packaging? Why?
21. And in terms of sustainability? Why?
22. How do you perceive the recycling performance of McDonald's? Why?

Authenticity

23. Do you perceive McDonald's as a trustworthy brand? Why/why not?
24. Do you perceive McDonald's as truly caring about the environment? Why/why not?