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Supervisor Marlene Wiggill
Examiner Cecilia Cassinger

Making tradition sustainable: How consumers make sense of NIVEA's sustainability communication

LISA WINNENBURG

Lund University
Department of Strategic Communication
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Abstract

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With the growing concern about the environment, consumers become more critical in their consumption and almost every organization communicates its sustainability efforts. However, not in every case do consumers believe in sustainability claims. This exploratory case study with the global skincare brand NIVEA examines the brand's sustainability communication from a consumer perspective. It aims to understand the meaning creation process of consumers according to sensemaking theory based on their brand authenticity perceptions. Findings of focus group interviews show that brand authenticity is perceived subjectively as consumers draw on different dimensions of brand authenticity and cues extracted from sustainability communication to attribute authenticity. The consumers' sensemaking process is marked by lacking awareness, contradictions, and uncertainty. Though NIVEA appears to have a trust advantage based on its long tradition, its sustainability communication is rarely known and if so, viewed critically. Consumers seek understandable facts, concrete measures, goals, and achievements. This study contributes to strategic communication by examining how sustainability communication must be strategically managed to reach consumers' brand authenticity perceptions. Limitations of the study are discussed and suggestions for further research are derived from the findings.

Keywords: Perceived Brand Authenticity, Sustainability Communication, Sense-making Theory, Consumer Perspective, Global Brand

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Abbreviations

SC	Sustainability Communication
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
PBA	Perceived Brand Authenticity
CoS	Communication of Sustainability

1. Introduction

For some time now, we are facing one crisis after another - financial crisis, refugee crisis, pandemic crisis, Ukraine crisis. Hovering over most of these crises is the climate crisis, the greatest challenge humanity as a collective has ever faced (United Nations, 2021). In February 2021, the world-renowned naturalist David Attenborough stated in a UN Security Council meeting that global cooperation, recognition of common responsibility, and immediate actions are fundamental for dealing with climate change and its effects (United Nations, 2021).

The current time holds an enormous pressure for change for organizations and their business models and requires them to take on responsibility: “The United Nations is asking companies, cities, and financial institutions to prepare credible decarbonization plans” and to actively contribute to the Paris Agreement on climate change (United Nations, 2021). More and more companies are getting active in communicating environmental sustainability agendas that promise ambitious targets such as recyclable packaging materials, reduction of greenhouse gases, and climate-neutral production sites. Besides regulatory pressure, companies are indirectly forced to speak up for sustainability due to the strong shift in consumer attitudes towards environmental issues and the increasing feeling of uncertainty resulting from the crises (Bruhn et al., 2012). Results of Unilever's global "Make Purpose Pay" study (2017) showed that the majority of consumers cares about sustainability which is also reflected in consumer behavior and buying decisions. As it seems to become a global trend to communicate sustainable organizational practices and due to its potential for growing sales (Unilever, 2017), lacking faith in sustainability marketing and low credibility in companies arise among consumers (Napoli et al., 2014). From a consumer perspective, the flood of sustainability claims makes a classification as true responsibility or rather greenwashing – as targeted highlighting of well-performing sustainability aspects while leaving unsustainable practices unmentioned (Reilly & Weirup, 2010) – more difficult, leading to consumers being increasingly overwhelmed (Parguel et al., 2011). Are there sincere and true intentions behind sustainability efforts communicated or is it rather deliberate profit-maximizing actions? According to the study results of Unilever (2017), one concern holding consumers back from buying sustainable products or services is that they question the truth of the brand's statements about sustainability.

Consequently, from a communication professional's perspective, there is a stronger need to deliver sustainability messages honestly and sincerely to become or stay relevant to consumers (Genç, 2017; Unilever, 2017). Previous research agrees that authenticity perceptions contribute significantly to positive values like brand trust and purchase intentions (e.g. Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020; Morhart et al., 2015; Oh et al., 2019; Portal et al., 2019; Pratomo & Magetsari, 2020; Tran et al., 2020). However, two circumstances pose a problem for communication professionals. Firstly, to appear authentic, superficial statements and ambitious promises are not enough as a response to global events nowadays, but organizations have to keep communication and action consistent (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020). However, in most cases, sustainability efforts must be communicated even when the organization is not 100% sustainable, as corporate sustainability is a step-by-step process and no overnight achievement (Signitzer & Prexl, 2007). As a result, an organization might become vulnerable to accusations of greenwashing and is more likely to lose authenticity since actions do not seem to match its words in the consumers' eyes when spotting unsustainable practices. Secondly, the rise of digital technologies (i.e., social media) leads to more transparent corporate communication, provoking the questioning of corporate statements.

Consequently, with the growing call for sustainability and increasing critical consumerism, appearing credible and truly responsible to consumers as a brand when communicating sustainability efforts is a challenging tightrope walk. Companies put a lot of money and effort into sustainability communication (from now on SC) nowadays, but it remains unclear, whether consumers perceive it as trustworthy and credible. Understanding the consumers' sensemaking process of SC based on brand authenticity perceptions is essential for communication professionals to align the corporate social responsibility (CSR¹) communication strategy and mutual interests of organizations and consumers (Diers-Lawson et al., 2020). So far, the concepts of brand authenticity and SC have been researched on their own while a combined approach has been rarely examined from a consumer perspective. This presents a serious gap in the field of strategic communication as brand authenticity is an individual's subjective perception and nothing lying in objective reality. Taking consumers' understanding into account is essential when creating communication strategies aiming to improve authenticity perceptions.

¹ The concept of CSR describes the social responsibility of companies for their impact on social, environmental, and ethical concerns by their business operations (Chun & Bang, 2016; European Commission, n.d.). This study focuses on the environmental dimension of CSR as it represents the issue of sustainability.

1.1 Aim & Research question

This research project is set up as a case study of the global skincare brand NIVEA, part of the German Beiersdorf Group, and intends to improve the understanding of the consumers' meaning-creation process of NIVEA's SC according to sensemaking theory. The results of this research provide a valuable basis for further research as well as guidance for communication professionals engaging in SC. As Diers-Lawson et al. (2020) stated, practitioners often have little understanding of consumer motivations and attitudes towards CSR, given how different they are from their own. Findings of this study shall support professionals to shape communication of sustainability strategically toward positive brand authenticity perceptions and prevent being accused of greenwashing by consumers. Further, findings contribute to current academic work by examining the concepts of brand authenticity and SC from a consumer perspective.

To achieve the described purpose, the study seeks to answer the following overall research question: **How do consumers make sense of NIVEA's sustainability communication based on brand authenticity perceptions?**

1.2 Strategic Sustainability Communication

To define the study's relevance for the field of strategic communication, strategic communication is understood in accordance to Hallahan et al. (2007) and Zerfass et al. (2018) as the deliberate use of communication to fulfill the organizational mission and reach organizational goals that are substantial for the entity's existence. In the context of this research, the concrete mission lies in the communication of organizational sustainability efforts to stakeholders² to build positive brand authenticity perceptions. Today's substantiality of sustainability communication for organizational survival and success characterizes it as a *strategic* issue. The strategic complexity of this research topic is both competition- and environment-driven, meaning that floods of SC force companies to stand out from competitors and the critical environmental condition, changing consumer demands towards sustainable offerings, and legal requirements (e.g., Paris Agreement) force organizations to change (Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), 2021; Kachaner et al., 2020; Zerfass et al., 2018). Besides economic goals, organizational goals can be characterized as of reputational and relational nature, such as gaining legitimacy and brand authenticity as a basis for trustful relationships with consumers (Portal et al., 2019;

² Consumers are the only stakeholders that will be focused on for the purpose of this study.

Zerfass & Huck, 2007). Examining the perceived authenticity of SC, one may come across the distinction between brand communication (Public Relations) with the aim to build trust and gain a positive reputation, and product communication (Marketing) with a focus on increasing sales. Strategic communication as a field of integrated communication unites both public relations and marketing.

1.3 Disposition

This study is structured as follows: initially, previous literature on brand authenticity and sustainability communication is reviewed and synthesized to place the study in the context of previous research. Thereafter, the theoretical framework is presented, involving a sensemaking approach to sustainability communication and the concept of perceived brand authenticity that are useful to analyze and understand the empirical material. The methodology chapter describes the case organization and its sustainability communication strategy, motivates the qualitative research design of in-depth focus group interviews, elaborates the data analysis approach, and discusses ethical considerations. After presenting the research findings, the study concludes with a discussion of the findings against the background of previous research and theory. The discussion is followed by practical implications for the case organization, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

The following literature review describes, evaluates, and synthesizes articles that examined the concepts of CSR (i.e., SC) and brand authenticity to provide a clearer view of relationships as well as interdependences and introduce previous research findings.

This chapter is structured by firstly, introducing and synthesizing different understandings of the concepts of SC and brand authenticity and secondly, identifying and describing the role of brand authenticity and its antecedents as factors influencing the formation of brand authenticity perceptions.

Literature emerged from a key search on LUB search, Google Scholar, and connected-papers.com as well as from references to previous academic work in articles from search results. The retrieved articles were filtered for an explicit focus on the two concepts. As academic work on brand authenticity in brand and consumer research is rich, a focus was set on the latest research results.

2.1 Sustainability Communication

When it comes to the concept of SC, there is no common definition, but rather different terms can be found in academic literature such as sustainability communication, corporate sustainability (communication), and sustainable development (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011; Reilly & Weirup, 2010; Signitzer & Prexl, 2007). While Middlemiss (2003) considered sustainability as “the wider term which partners CSR with environmental and financial performance” (p. 360), Reilly and Weirup (2010) regard sustainability as a non-financial metric to measure a firm’s effectiveness. This metric “overlaps with CSR in its focus on advancing the standard of living while also preserving natural and human resources” (Reilly & Weirup, 2010, p. 2). This understanding is consistent with the frequently cited definition of sustainable development in the Brundtland Report (Brundtland Commission, 1987): “Sustainable development is [the] development that meets the [economic, environmental, and social] needs of the present [generation] without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 47). Signitzer and Prexl (2007) built the bridge by stating that sustainable development at organizational level is equivalent to corporate sustainability, which is no rigid state but a

“strategic management process of working towards a balance of economic, social, and environmental goals and values” (p. 3). In the context of this study, translating this corporate sustainability performance with a focus on the environment into communication is labeled a *sustainability communication*.

Previous research proved that corporate communication has a significant role in informing stakeholders about sustainability efforts (e.g. Reilly & Weirup, 2010; Signitzer & Prexl, 2007). Through SC, an organization anchors its role and its commitment in the context of sustainability in the awareness of its stakeholders. Reilly and Hynan (2014) examined SC of 16 global corporations and the findings resembled a triad of strategy, change, and culture. Though results showed that “corporate communication cannot be considered a proxy for actual sustainability performance, it can provide a window into an organization’s culture: communication reflects what is valued by the firm” (Reilly & Hynan, 2014, p. 757). Following this, companies with a corporate culture supporting sustainability are more active in promoting their commitment to sustainability externally (Reilly & Weirup, 2010; Reilly & Hynan, 2014). For this study, it means that consumers can infer the overall organizational strategy and culture from a brand’s SC.

Focusing on the communication aspect regarding sustainability, Godemann and Michelsen (2011) described SC as “a process of mutual understanding dealing with the future development of society at the core of which is a vision of sustainability” (p. 6) with the task “to critically evaluate and introduce an understanding of the human-environment relationship into social discourse” (p. 3). Genç (2017) examined the role of communication in sustainability and differentiated between communication about, of, and for sustainability. Communication of sustainability (CoS) resembles the notion of external SC followed in this research project. CoS is described as instrumental or managerial since the organization follows a particular objective when communicating sustainability efforts strategically (Genç, 2017). In this study, the particular objective is regarded as evoking brand authenticity perceptions.

Having studied the ethical aspect of corporate communication, Parguel et al. (2011) realized that today’s flood of sustainability claims makes it challenging for consumers to differentiate between true responsibility and pure profit orientation. Here, the organization’s reputation is a critical factor in determining perceptions of (in)authenticity of a brand’s CSR communication (Diers-Lawson et al., 2020).

2.2 Brand Authenticity

Previous research on the concept of brand authenticity provided a fragmented picture instead of a shared definition. Many scholars (Akbar & Wymer, 2017; Bruhn et al., 2012; Nunes et al., 2021; Portal et al., 2019; Schallehn et al., 2014) described brand authenticity as a multidimensional concept that is socially constructed by consumers as part of their brand's image and thus often referred to as *perceived brand authenticity (PBA)*. Morhart et al. (2015) defined PBA “as the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful toward itself (*continuity*), true to its consumers (*credibility*), motivated by caring and responsibility (*integrity*), and able to support consumers in being true to themselves (*symbolism*)” (p. 203). The understanding of PBA within this research project is guided by the dimensional scale defined by Morhart et al. (2015). Kumar and Kaushik (2022) recently found that it is reliable across various brands and cultures.

Drawing a connection between the construct of brand authenticity and SC, Diers-Lawson et al.'s (2020) definition is useful: An authentic brand perception resembles “stakeholder judgment that CSR activities are directly linked to an organization's values” (p. 332). This means that SC should be based on the corporate purpose and the organizational attitude towards sustainability. The SC's tonality must correspond to the brand identity. This resembles Morhart et al.'s (2015) notion of *continuity* as a brand's faithfulness toward itself.

Cinelli and LeBoeuf (2020) focused on the dimension of *genuineness* when defining brand authenticity “as a judgment about the genuineness of a brand's image” (p. 42) which is in line with Beverland et al.'s (2008) concept of moral authenticity as the genuineness regarding the brand's intent and commitment. Though dimensions of brand authenticity partly differ among previous research (*continuity, credibility, integrity, symbolism, genuineness, originality, reliability, naturalness, individuality*), they all provide support to ensure comprehensive understanding and operationalization of the concept. Portal et al. (2019) and Tran et al. (2020) advised integrating the dimensions into communication strategies and brand management measures that aim to appear authentic as consumers attribute to the dimensions when evaluating claims of authenticity.

2.2.1 The role of Brand Authenticity

Though no commonly accepted definition of brand authenticity exists, previous research consistently demonstrated its important role in the overall success of brands, more specifically, to increase purchase intentions and reach positive product perceptions, customer satisfaction, and brand trust (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020; Morhart et al., 2015; Oh et al., 2019; Portal et al.,

2019; Pratomo & Magetsari, 2020; Safeer et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2020; Yang & Battocchio, 2021). As several studies (Napoli et al., 2014; Oh et al., 2019; Tran et al., 2020) proved, products of brands that are perceived as authentic by consumers are preferred in the purchase decision because they are perceived to be more valuable and of higher quality. Authenticity perceptions support the consumers' motivation to visit a store or website, recommend the brand to others and engage with the brand (Kumar & Kaushik, 2022; Oh et al., 2019). Consistent with these findings, a direct impact of brand authenticity on brand trust was identified, which in turn positively influences the consumers' purchase intention (Napoli et al., 2014; Portal et al., 2019; Pratomo & Magetsari, 2020). Portal et al. (2019) added that this impact was partially mediated by perceiving good intentions of the brand (warmth) and perceiving the brand's ability to make good intentions come true (competence).

Just as Portal et al. (2019) highlighted the role of trustful relationships between an airline brand and its consumers to reach authenticity perceptions, other scholars (Fritz et al., 2017; Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019) considered an authentic brand as a valuable basis for consumers to establish emotional connections with a brand. This shows that brand authenticity and brand trust are in a reciprocal relationship. To develop trustful relationships between a brand and its consumers, principles such as commitment to values, keeping of promises, and representation of human-like (emotional) characteristics have turned out to be essential (Portal et al., 2019). The few studies that connected brand authenticity with SC (Chun & Bang, 2016; Diers-Lawson et al., 2020) identified that CSR measures by brands perceived as authentic lead to stronger customer loyalty than CSR measures by brands perceived as inauthentic. Supporting this, Alhouti et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of creating CSR initiatives that are perceived as authentic rather than merely engaging in CSR regardless of its effect on consumers.

2.2.2 Antecedents of Brand Authenticity

Existing research not only examined the impact of brand authenticity on the overall brand performance but also provided findings on how consumers form their opinions about the authenticity of brands. Dwivedi and McDonald (2018) highlighted the overall importance of brand communication to reach positive authenticity perceptions of fast-moving consumer good brands. To evaluate the authenticity of a brand, consumers draw on diverse cues such as the absence of bad press (indexical), a brand's virtue (iconic), and identification with the brand (existential) (Beverland et al., 2008; Morhart et al., 2015). These cues are discussed in more detail in section 3.2 as they form the theoretical framework of this study.

Further, perceptions of CSR (in)authenticity seem to be influenced by factors such as *perceived impact, perceived motive, reparation, and fit* (Alhouti et al., 2016). Hereby, *perceived impact* and *perceived motive* resemble Cinelli's and LeBoeuf's (2020) notion of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations that drive brand authenticity perceptions. Impressions of extrinsic motivations such as profitability or status negatively impact perceptions of authenticity while impressions of intrinsic motivations like passion and sincerity support perceptions of authenticity (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020). This is in line with Diers-Lawson et al.'s (2020) motivation-hygiene theory (MHT) which suggests that social responsibility initiatives will be more successful when they invoke more intrinsic motivational factors, like meeting consumers' values, morals, desires, and demands. The notion of intrinsic motivations links to Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension of *integrity*, meaning to be perceived as motivated by caring and true responsibility. Consumers' authenticity perceptions depend on whether they assess the brand's CSR efforts as an honest intention to make a real impact in the world and whether the brand's (monetary or temporal) input is perceived as appropriate relative to the organization's size and revenues (Alhouti et al., 2016; Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020). Turning around this relationship, authenticity itself is a critical factor for whether a brand and its CSR activities are regarded as motivational oriented or merely driven by hygiene interests (Diers-Lawson et al., 2020; Napoli et al., 2014). Alhouti et al.'s (2016) inauthenticity-driver *reparation* can be classified as an extrinsic motive since reparative CSR actions are forced by negative external reactions and implemented to repair the image. Scholars (Herzig & Schaltegger, 2011; Middlemiss, 2003; Yang & Battocchio, 2021) stressed the role of *openness* and *transparency* towards consumers to avoid impressions of extrinsic, reparative motives and concealment of ecologically unsustainable practices (greenwashing). Here, a connection can be drawn to Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension of *credibility* as being true to consumers. Yang and Battocchio (2021) highlighted transparency in terms of production and pricing. Looking at the skincare sector, SC initiatives mainly focus on the products and their ingredients while rarely mentioning production processes and pricing aspects.

Alhouti et al.'s (2016) *positive fit* reflects the ideas of *consistency* and *continuity* as the consonance of present actions, brand behavior, and brand promise highlighted by various scholars (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Molleda, 2010). Safeer et al. (2021) and Fritz et al. (2017) emphasized the reflection of brand heritage to enhance authenticity perceptions. The alignment of organizational reputation to the brand (and its sustainability activities) is essential to reach trust and credibility instead of evoking skepticism (Diers-Lawson et al., 2020; FleishmanHillard, 2018).

Hernandez-Fernandez' and Lewis' (2019) study further confirmed *individuality* (difference from competing brands) as capturing and enhancing consumer perceptions of brand authenticity. The aspect of individuality resembles Schallehn et al.'s (2014) notion of an authentic brand being “clear about what it stands for. It is a brand which positions itself from the inside out versus one that panders to the latest trend” (p. 193). This is especially interesting in terms of SC since sustainability can be regarded as a current trend that organizations are forced to join. In this context, Schallehn et al.'s (2014) remarks would mean that sustainability must be anchored in the core of an organization’s strategy to stand out compared to competing brands. When it comes to the brand’s positioning, meeting consumers’ self-perception is supportive as self-congruence enhances brand authenticity perceptions (Fritz et al., 2017; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022). This can be linked to Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension of *symbolism* as the consumer’s identification with a brand.

2.4 Synthesis

Research findings demonstrated a high relevance of brand authenticity in contemporary communication practices and the importance of strategic communication to improve PBA.

As visualized in figure 1, previous research introduced different layers in terms of the concept of PBA. Firstly, antecedents present factors that influence how consumers form perceptions of brand authenticity and should be taken into consideration by SC practitioners to reach authenticity perceptions. For instance, scholars (Alhouti et al., 2016; Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Morhart et al., 2015; Portal et al., 2019) highlighted the importance of consistency between corporate communication, promises, and actions in consonance with the overall organizational strategy and its values and culture. Secondly, consumers draw on different dimensions when evaluating SC claims and trying to form a perception of brand authenticity. Dimensions must be evoked by the antecedents. Thirdly, in case SC is practiced in a way to build a positive perception of the dimensions, positive outcomes of PBA can be reached.

Consequently, SC should be considered from a strategic perspective to influence the consumers’ formation of perceptions of brand authenticity. Synthesizing previous research, figure 1 visualizes this formation process considering the perspectives of the brand (i.e., communication professionals) and the consumer.



Figure 1: Overview of previous research on brand authenticity (own illustration)

3. Theoretical Framework

Against the background of the highly complex and ambiguous nature of sustainability and authenticity, the planned research has its theoretical framework based on the sensemaking approach that shares the view of reality as constructed through social interactions. Based on the sensemaking approach of Weick (1995), it will be examined how NIVEA consumers experience the brand's SC and retrospectively construct meaning (brand (in)authenticity perceptions).

3.1 Sensemaking Approach to Sustainability Communication

While the sensemaking approach is traditionally applied to understand internal organizational change processes and the negotiation of organizational values and culture among employees (e.g., Kopaneva, 2019; Miller & Fyke, 2020), this study aims to examine how consumers - as external stakeholders of an organization - make sense of SC based on brand authenticity perceptions. Previous studies demonstrated the applicability of sensemaking outside the internal organizational context with consumers as sense makers. For example, Wolter et al. (2021) examined the consumers' sensemaking process of an organization's reputation.

Making sense means experiencing ambiguous situations and assigning meaning to them to understand the complexity of experiences (Weick et al., 2005). Bebbington (2001) described sustainability as having multiple meanings for people while Canavan and McCamley (2021) found that judgments on authenticity are open to various interpretations. Against the background of the ambiguous nature of sustainability and authenticity, the sensemaking approach is especially suitable as a theoretical framework for this investigation. The ambiguity of sustainability and the overload of SC lead to uncertainty, resulting in people's search for meaning (Cramer et al., 2006). "People try to relieve this uncertainty by seeking authenticity in their daily lives" (Bruhn et al., 2012, p. 567). Especially in complex environments such as the spaces of social media, sensemaking processes emerge to deal with claims and offerings by brands (Milfeld & Haley, 2022).

Because of the room for interpretation when it comes to truth, genuineness, and reality, forming perceptions of brand authenticity necessarily is a negotiation of brand values and honest intentions and thus, can be regarded as an ongoing and social sensemaking process.

Weick et al. (2005) highlighted the ongoing character of sensemaking since it “is about labeling and categorizing to stabilize the streaming of experience” (p. 411). The streaming of experience never ends just as brand communication, i.e. SC, is a constant input and negotiation nowadays.

Weick (1995) described that sensemaking asks “What does an event mean?” (p. 410). This research deals with the question “What does (NIVEA’s) SC mean?” The process of finding an answer to the question may be marked by the contradiction of perceiving honest intentions versus profit orientation (greenwashing).

This process of creating meaning does not occur solitary but through relating to others within a social system as merely gaining more information does not solve the ambiguity. Communicating with each other is necessary to reduce the variety of meanings and constitute shared meaning in an interactive process (Miller & Fyke, 2020; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). As authenticity perceptions are neither inherent objective attributes of a brand nor are they formed by an isolated individual, but in interactive settings of social and cultural exchange (Bruhn et al., 2012; Rickly-Boyd, 2013), it is relevant to look at it from a sensemaking perspective.

Further, the meaning-creation process has a retrospective character as people look back at their prior definition and adjust it after having made interpretations (Weick, 1995). Due to the retrospective focus, the sensemaking perspective is often criticized for missing out on the prospective aspect of envisioning the future. Especially when it comes to evaluating current organizational efforts for a more sustainable future, a future-oriented view might guide people’s thoughts.

The sensemaking perspective is further criticized for not sufficiently explaining the notion of *process* and *sense* (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). By expanding the theoretical framework with the concept of PBA based on Morhart et al. (2015), *process* is made more specific in this study (Section 3.2). It is relevant to acknowledge these weaknesses, even though the sensemaking perspective still provides a valid framework suitable for this study due to the mentioned reasons.

Besides the ongoing, social, and retrospective characteristics of sensemaking processes, Weick (1995) described further properties of sensemaking: firstly, sensemaking focuses on plausibility rather than accuracy, meaning that it is not about uncovering the ultimate truth but rather about engaging in a negotiation process to reach comprehension. The focus on plausibility resembles Morhart et al.’s (2015) constructivist perspective on authenticity in which actual authenticity is regarded as impossible but authenticity is a socially constructed ideal (Figure 2). Secondly, sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, which comes close to Morhart et al.’s (2015) existentialist perspective on authenticity stating that consumers feel their true selves

by consuming a brand or product. During the sensemaking process, both actions and interpretations are determined by personal self-conception and the environment influencing one's own identity (Weick, 1995). Thirdly, sensemaking is enactive in sensible environments. As this study explores a consumer context instead of an organizational context, this characteristic is understood as the interaction between participants within the focus group setting in which talking to each other forms the precondition for a common sensemaking process. Lastly, sensemaking involves focusing on cues extracted from the surrounding context as a point of reference to create a larger sense and turn ambiguity into plausible narratives. This characteristic of sensemaking will be further elaborated on in connection with brand authenticity in the next section.

3.2 Conceptual Framework of Perceived Brand Authenticity

Morhart et al. (2015) and Beverland et al. (2008) defined indexical (1), iconic (2), and existential (3) cues that consumers draw on to form opinions about authenticity and judge a brand's ethics. Indexical cues (1) are regarded as objective, verifiable facts that represent evidence-based brand characteristics such as ingredients, origin, or age. Morhart et al. (2015) found that consumers' skepticism towards a brand's social and environmental engagement is lower the easier the brand's communication content can be verified. Iconic cues (2) refer to a social constructivist perspective on authenticity whereby authenticity results from one's own beliefs and subjective mental associations. In this sense, brand characteristics are impression-based, such as a brand's virtue and values. Existential cues (3) are related to the consumer's identity and can be seen as self-referential brand characteristics. A brand of high existential authenticity lets consumers feel faithful and true to themselves when consuming it, which accords with the previously mentioned dimension of *symbolism*.

PBA arises from the interplay of objective facts, subjective impressions, and existential motives connected with a brand. Matching Morhart et al.'s (2015) three perspectives of authenticity, Moulard et al. (2021) proposed three types of authenticity (i.e., true-to-ideal, true-to-fact, true-to-self) (Figure 2). The true-to-fact type resembles an objectivist perspective and supports the view of a fact existing consistently with reality. Following the constructivist perspective, the true-to-ideal type describes a socially constructed ideal that requires social or cultural consensus. The true-to-self type comes close to Morhart et al.'s (2015) existentialist perspective in which the consumer's identity plays a vital role in forming judgments about brand characteristics. The consumer's intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and whether the perceived brand's behavior or brand manager's motivations correspond with their own motivations are relevant

factors in the assessment of brand authenticity (Moulard et al., 2016, 2021). The triad resembles Safer et al.'s (2021) distinction between a subjective and an objective approach: While an objective approach to authenticity deals with providing information for the consumers' assessment of brand authenticity (indexical cues; true to fact), the subjective approach considers consumers' characteristics, interests, and beliefs as influential factors (existential cues; true to self and iconic cues; true to ideal).

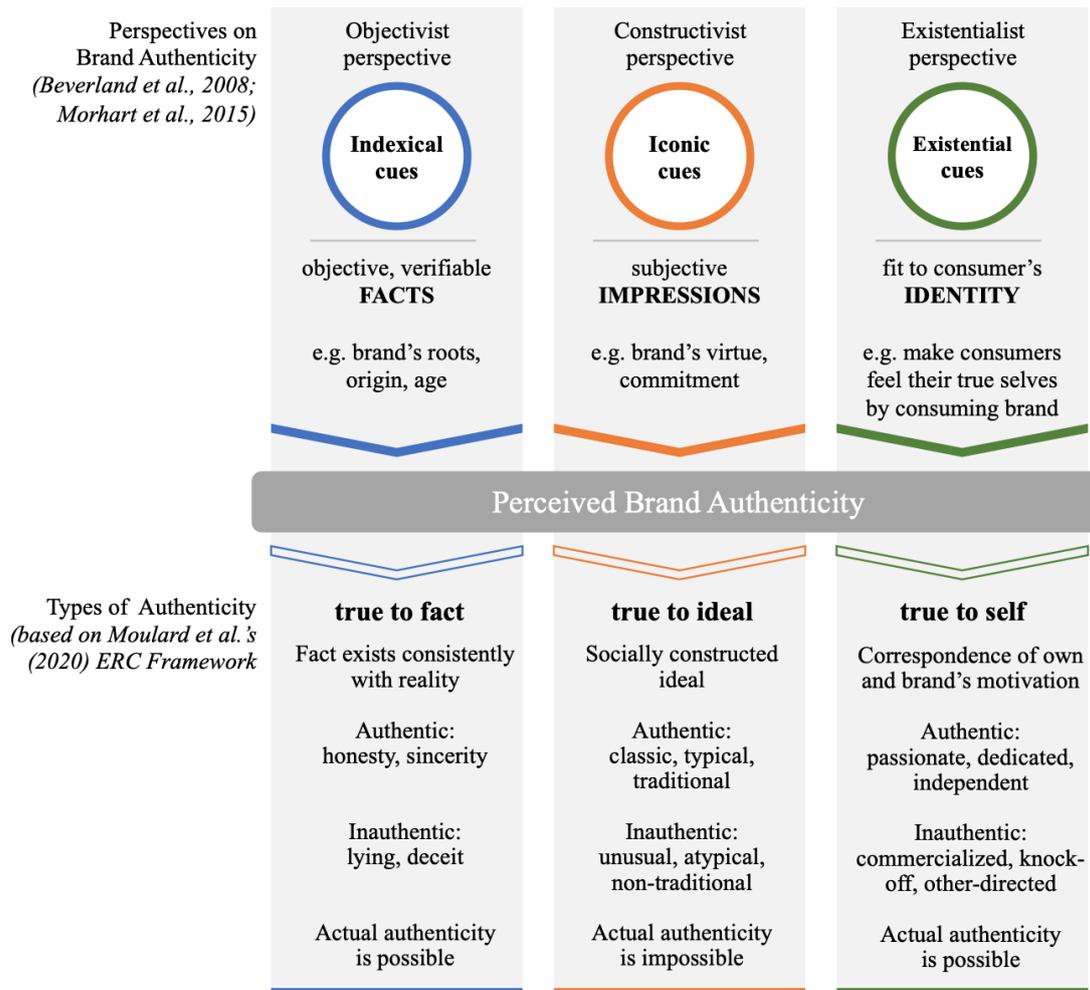


Figure 2: Overview of the concept of perceived brand authenticity (own illustration)

In this study, the reflexive process of meaning-creation will be observed and triggered through different cues that consumers draw on (Weick, 1995). According to Napoli et al. (2014), “there are multiple pathways by which brand authenticity can be established” (p. 1091). This study focuses on exploring those pathways by examining the process of sensemaking as well as how consumers interpret and link potential cues to brand authenticity perceptions.

4. Methodology

From the sensemaking perspective, this study explores how SC is talked about, made meaningful, and understood by consumers. A qualitative case study with focus group interviews was chosen as an appropriate methodological approach. This chapter will describe the study's epistemological framework and introduce the chosen organization with its SC strategy, the method of choice, the recruitment process of participants, the interview proceedings, the analytical process, and ethical reflections.

4.1 Research Paradigm

The planned exploratory research project seeks to understand how consumers make sense of SC and perceive brand authenticity. It is about the participants' subjective experiences and meaning-creation processes according to sensemaking theory. To gain in-depth insights into the consumers' sensemaking process and the formation of opinions about SC, a qualitative research approach was chosen and embedded in the interpretive tradition (Prasad, 2018).

The tradition guides the research process. Interpretivism is based on a social constructionist perspective, considering reality and knowledge as nothing intangible that exists, but rather as something subjective that lies in human experiences and consciousness (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Prasad, 2018). As stated, brand authenticity is an individual's subjective perception and nothing lying in objective reality. According to the sociologist and system theorist Niklas Luhmann (2017), constructivism offers perspectives to think about phenomena against the background of high ambiguity, uncertainty, and a plurality of meanings.

4.2 Case Study

To answer the research question and achieve the research purpose of understanding consumers' sensemaking process of SC based on brand authenticity perceptions, the study has been conducted as a qualitative case study searching for meaning and understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Creswell (2013) proposed, multiple sources of information are useful to explore a bounded system. This in-depth investigation involved analyzing documents (sustain-

ability report and website) and conducting qualitative interviews to observe the participants' meaning-creation. The skincare brand NIVEA was chosen as the case, serving as a bounded system and NIVEA's consumers present the main unit of analysis. NIVEA as a case enabled participants to discuss concrete SC initiatives and express perceptions more specifically. NIVEA was chosen for this investigation as it actively engages in SC on a global level while not being fully sustainable (i.e., climate-neutral), meaning that it still has environmentally unfriendly products and processes. Further, sustainability is a highly relevant and challenging topic in the beauty sector due to water waste, carbon production, and energy consumption across its supply chain (Cosmetics Industry - The Personal Care Association, 2017). This study was not conducted in cooperation with the brand but independently.

4.2.1 Selection and Description of the Case Organization

The brand NIVEA is owned by the global skincare company Beiersdorf AG³ with headquarters in Hamburg, Germany. The company has 140 years of skincare experience and is known for its innovative, high-quality products. The traditional NIVEA creme, launched in 1911, was the brand's first product. Apart from NIVEA, Beiersdorf has further international brands in its portfolio including Eucerin, Hansaplast, LaPrairie, Tesa and Labello (*Beiersdorf Brand Overview*, n.d.). As a global brand with a long tradition, NIVEA is embedded in a competitive environment and must respond to global events such as climate change and the call for sustainability without becoming unfaithful to itself. NIVEA has not yet reached a status of full sustainability but rather regards it as a *journey* (*Sustainability Report*, 2021).

4.2.2 NIVEA's Sustainability Communication Strategy

The brand's SC strategy has been analyzed through the brand's websites that exist for each market and its latest sustainability report, published at the time of the study by the parent company Beiersdorf and reporting about all its brands (*Sustainability Report*, 2021). Previous studies (Herzig & Schaltegger, 2011; Reilly & Weirup, 2010) described sustainability reports as an instrument to present evidence of actions taken and achievements to both internal and external stakeholders.

³ The term AG (Aktiengesellschaft) describes a corporation publicly traded on stock exchanges by shareholders.

An analysis of the material indicated how sustainability initiatives are consistent with the organizational strategy and values. On the parent company's website (*Our Approach to Sustainability*, n.d.) a holistic approach to sustainability as part of the corporate culture and strategy is described. The overall organizational strategy of Beiersdorf is based on the corporate purpose to "care beyond skin" which expresses the corporate mission to take responsibility beyond the core business of skincare. The so-called C.A.R.E.+ strategy, that has been pursued since 2019, includes a Sustainability Agenda that focuses on the environment, society, and consumers and is linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the United Nations.

As this study focuses on the environmental aspect of sustainability, a closer look is taken at the environmental area of Beiersdorf's Sustainability Agenda in which four focus fields have been defined, describing the impact of processes and products on the environment: climate positive future, fully circular resources, sustainable land use, and regenerative water environments. For each focus field, concrete and measurable climate targets have been set such as 100% recyclable, reusable or refillable packaging by 2025.

NIVEA is regarded as a leading example in terms of becoming sustainable: "Innovative product formulas and modern packaging make the NIVEA product portfolio a pioneer in the transformation of our overall company" (*Sustainability Report*, 2021, p. 14). The NIVEA *Naturally Good* face care assortment presents Beiersdorf's first climate-neutral product range. Overall, the brand NIVEA follows its parent company's Sustainability Agenda by promoting the message "One skin. One planet. One care." (e.g., Swedish website⁴) and thus linking climate care with skincare. This way, NIVEA's sustainability approach is consistent with the overall organizational strategy to *care beyond skin*.

The Sustainability Agenda of Beiersdorf is communicated as a journey that is taken together with all Beiersdorf stakeholders, highlighting the consumers' role: "Our consumers are increasingly interested in the sustainability and environmental compatibility of product formulas and packaging. In view of this, transparent communication is a key concern for us" (*Sustainability Report*, 2021, p. 9). Acknowledging the key role of consumers in achieving the defined climate targets, Beiersdorf informs its consumers with "regular, candid communication about [...] sustainability activities and [...] product ranges" (*Sustainability Report*, 2021, p. 9) to support them in making informed purchase decisions. According to their motto "100% transparency",

⁴ *One Skin. One Planet. One Care.* (2021, December 1). Nivea.se. <https://www.nivea.se/om-foretaget/one-skin-one-planet-one-care>

products show exact proportions of recycled content in packaging material (*Sustainability Report*, 2021). Introducing their achievements in 2021, such as reduced carbon emissions, Beiersdorf states “business growth and decarbonization can go hand in hand” (*Sustainability Report*, 2021, p. 3). Referring back to theory, this hints at a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in becoming sustainable as a big corporation.

Looking at external communication, the corporate social media channels are used as a way to communicate in video format with consumers and encourage sustainable behavior by providing helpful tips, explanations, and interesting information (*Sustainability Report*, 2020, p. 31). Appendix 1 shows a selection of posts by the official NIVEA Instagram profile used as examples during the focus group interviews to trigger discussion (Section 4.3.2). Apart from social media channels, the corporate website and digital technologies, such as QR codes on the products, provide information about initiatives, concrete ingredients, and packaging materials.

Against the background of previous research, Beiersdorf appears to move in the right direction by being consistent with the overall organizational strategy and values, seeking to involve and educate consumers, and communicating transparently (Diers-Lawson et al., 2020; Signitzer & Prexl, 2007). Supporting this, in Bruhn et al.'s (2012) qualitative consumer interviews 3 out of 17 participants mentioned NIVEA as a strong authentic brand when being asked to think of a brand of their choice perceived as authentic. Quality, trustworthiness, consistency, tradition, and naturalness were mentioned as reasons. Communicating sustainability as a journey instead of regarding it as a rigid state resembles the notion of a “strategic management process” by Signitzer and Prexl (2007). Though consumers are not the target group of sustainability reports, its content provides useful background knowledge for this study.

4.3 Qualitative In-Depth Focus Group Interviews

As the research aims to explore socially constructed consumer perceptions and understand their subjective experiences in an interactive setting, qualitative interviews with focus groups of consumers have been conducted to observe their sensemaking process of NIVEA’s SC. The research design allowed identifying patterns of perceptions among participants and producing spontaneous expressions of viewpoints (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Krueger, 1994). Linking back to Weick’s (1995) sensemaking theory that highlights social collaboration and inter-subjectivity, the methodological approach of focus group interviews facilitated to observe the creation of shared understandings and meanings of the participants as an interactive act within

a social system (Wilkinson, 1998). This was particularly important as this is a topic where participants may not know how they feel when being asked directly.

4.3.1 Recruitment process & Sample

NIVEA resorts to existing online panels to conduct product tests and reviews. These could not be used as a recruitment base for this research for data protection and budget reasons as well as because this study is independent of the company. Instead, participants were recruited via NIVEA's official Instagram account⁵ assuming a high chance that followers are NIVEA consumers. Instagram presented an appropriate platform for recruitment as it is used actively by NIVEA to communicate its sustainable efforts. Additional recruitment of participants via LinkedIn was not applicable as no separate LinkedIn profile for NIVEA exists besides the one of the parent company and followers are mostly employees, skincare experts, or brand management professionals and consequently strongly biased.

Although the chosen recruitment approach excluded elderly consumers by focusing rather on digital natives (Generation Z and Millennials), it provided a valuable method due to the higher chance of participants being aware of sustainability efforts communicated digitally. This way, an age group (22-33 years) that actively calls for a sustainable future and critically reviews social media content of brands was recruited (BBMG & GlobeScan, 2020; NapoleonCat, 2022). Further supporting the recruitment approach, the authenticity of a brand and its content is decisive for consumers in this age group in which brand to support and follow on social media (Stackla, 2017; Yang et al., 2021).

Participants were selected in a non-probability purposive sample to reach the most suitable group of participants. Selection criteria were that participants had to be consumers of the brand, which was defined as knowing the brand and having bought a few of its products in the past. Participants had to be at least 18 years old to be contractually capable. The sample was limited to European consumers (citizens) as NIVEA's "One skin. One planet. One care."-campaign was only launched in the European market. Further, European consumers are more critical and demand higher authenticity compared to consumers from non-European countries (Stackla, 2017). As selection criteria could not be verified based on the information available on

⁵ NIVEA [@nivea]. (n.d.). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Retrieved February 14, 2022, from <https://www.instagram.com/nivea/>

Instagram, the fulfillment was ensured by including the criteria in the request form (Appendix 2.1) and the informed consent (Appendix 3). The informed consent further asked for demographics (age, nationality, gender) and contact details (e-mail).

Based on the author's perceived appropriateness of the Instagram profile picture and bio text, 250 followers were selected to be contacted. When contacting potential participants, monetary incentives were set by raffling two times 25 euros (adjusted to respective currencies). Three dates were set as options to select which did not allow to assign participants to groups according to common characteristics as suggested by Krueger (1994) to reach homogeneity in background and reinforce self-disclosure. However, this disadvantage was outweighed by the benefit to speed up the scheduling process. Self-disclosure was instead elicited through an open and comfortable atmosphere created by the moderator and homogeneity was partly achieved in that all participants were close in age. A Zoom link was sent out after having received a preferred date by the participants. Also, two reminders were sent out five days and one day before the interview took place (Appendix 2.1).

A number of three groups with 7 to 10 participants each was targeted in the planning stage to be prepared for last-minute cancellations and to reach a minimum number of 6 participants per group (Krueger, 1994). The group size was chosen to allow each member to share insights and the moderator to manage the discussion's flow (Krueger, 1994). A number of 22 positive responses was received. With three cancellations, 19 people (15 female, 4 male) of different European nationalities (Austrian (2), Danish (2), Dutch (2), French (1), German (9), Portuguese (1), Spanish (1), Swiss (1)) finally participated in the interviews (see participant details in Appendix 2.2). After having conducted three focus group interviews, a point of across-group data saturation was reached, meaning that statements became redundant across focus groups (Calder, 1977; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

4.3.3 Interview preparation and proceeding (Interview Guide)

The focus group interviews were conducted in February and March 2022 via Zoom as participants were located in different countries. Besides practicability, the virtual setting had the advantage that discussions could not end up in small conversations among seatmates, making it easier for the moderator to manage the discussion's flow (Krueger, 1994). Due to different nationalities of participants, interviews were conducted in English. A timeframe of 90 minutes was chosen as appropriate to support keeping the focus on relevant aspects and not exploring

topics apart from the actual research purpose (Krueger, 1994). Also, the timeframe was considered reasonable while a longer period could have had a deterrent effect on participants.

During the interviews, the moderator acted with moderate involvement to allow free dynamics to develop between participants (Krueger, 1994). It was the moderator's responsibility to create a pleasant atmosphere in which open knowledge-sharing and both expressions of confirming and dissenting comments were welcomed without feeling the need to reach consensus (Krueger, 1994). Nonetheless, the interviews had to be easily organized and directed to relevant topics to reach the research purpose which was done by asking specific questions and follow-up questions. Therefore, an interview guide (Appendix 4) was developed based on previous literature (Chapter 2) and theory (Chapter 3). The flexible guide provided orientation for semi-structured focus group interviews, meaning that it stated possible, not mandatory, open questions instead of forcing a rigid process. It was created based on Brinkmann's and Kvale's (2015) explanations on how to set up interviews and Patton's (2015) types of good questions. Following no rigid questionnaire but spontaneously reacting to the participants' statements enhanced detailed information and unexpected findings that developed during the conversations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A pilot study was conducted with one representative fulfilling the sampling selection criteria but not being familiar with NIVEA's SC to ensure a discussion in which all participants could participate.

Following Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), the interviews were funnel-shaped, starting with mentioning the intention to examine how participants perceive SC while withholding the interest in brand authenticity perceptions to avoid biased participants. An initial briefing informed participant about the situation, research purpose, timeframe, and video-recording of the interview. As an icebreaker, participants were asked to share their first association with NIVEA. The interview guide proceeded with open-ended interview questions that operationalized the research question and sub-themes (awareness of NIVEA's SC, attitude towards it, and understanding of brand authenticity). To ensure that sufficient information was provided and to be prepared to trigger the discussion, clarifications and follow-up questions supported each interview question. Questions were asked in diverse types (e.g. experience question B, opinion/value question C, feeling questions D and E) to reach a broad spectrum of answers. Question A laid a common basis by asking for the participants' understanding of SC and their perceptions of its importance in the skincare sector. In case the participants' understanding of SC differed from the understanding followed in this study, the focus on the environmental aspect of sustainability was clarified based on the academic definition by Signitzer and Prexl (2007).

To overcome the possible problem of lacking awareness of NIVEA's SC measures, social media posts - that cover a range of cues such as verifiable facts, emotional impressions, and an educational focus - were shown as support and to stimulate the discussion (Appendix 1). It was assumed that showing examples simplified the sensemaking process as people are having a hard time making sense of the inexperienced (Weick, 1995).

As an authentic brand perception is, among others, represented by a brand's faithfulness towards itself (*continuity*) (Morhart et al., 2015), a follow-up question asked whether the content is surprising for participants and if they feel like it matches with their NIVEA brand image. Against the background of Cinelli's and LeBoeuf's (2020) differentiation between intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors and Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension of *integrity*, question C asked for the participants' perceived intentions of NIVEA when engaging in sustainability issues. Asking whether the examples differ in perceived genuineness (question D & follow-up question) aimed to explore to what extent diverse cues, as described by Beverland et al. (2008) and Morhart et al. (2015), determine the sensemaking process and influence authenticity perceptions. To dive deeper into consumers' authenticity perceptions, follow-up questions asked for the brand's perceived competence and credibility (*Do you think that NIVEA is able to fulfill its promises? To what extent do you believe NIVEA's SC*) based on Hon's and Grunig's (1999) trust dimensions, Portal et al.'s (2019) notion of *competence*, and Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension of *credibility*.

To identify shifting perceptions and explore the retrospective sensemaking process, the examples were shown a second time and each participant was asked to give a final statement summarizing key learnings and insights of the discussion. As Weick (1995) stated, the outcome of the sensemaking process (interpretation) develops the prior definition instead of fulfilling it.

In a debrief, participants were informed about the full research purpose and the confidential handling of data.

4.3.4 Interview reflections

Retrospectively, each focus group discussion had its own dynamic, varying from actively responding to each other to relying on being asked questions by the moderator. The moderator's role presented a tightrope walk between providing guidance to encourage a variety of perspectives and intervening too much (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Krueger, 1994). Not asking leading questions that guide participants in a concrete direction presented a challenge as participants tended to give general responses such as how consumers, in general, perceive advertisements

and how brands could improve. Here, the moderator asked for a personal point of view to gain subjective perceptions and personal feelings in regards to NIVEA.

Further, outspoken participants partly dominated the discussion, not allowing everyone to share their perspectives. Thus, the moderator actively asked follow-up questions to more silent participants and endured pauses to give them a chance to voice their opinions. In general, the moderator only asked further questions if there was silence among all participants.

The mentioned challenges may have impacted the quality of the empirical material to a minor extent. Nevertheless, valuable insights were gained and no problems arose in terms of content and time. All participants seemed to understand the interview questions and were able to respond. The timeframe allowed discussion of all aspects in-depth while also providing extensive room for topics brought up by participants.

4.4 Data Analysis

The flexible interview guide used for data collection enabled higher comparability across focus group interviews during the analysis phase (Krueger, 1994). The first focus group interview was transcribed and closely read before conducting further interviews to already identify broad themes and look for confirmation or dissension during the following interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach was accompanied by the risk of being biased due to the impressions and responses of the first focus group which might have affected how the second discussion was conducted.

After having conducted all focus group interviews, they were transcribed verbatim by the author to secure consistent procedures and familiarize with the data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To grant anonymity but still distinguish participants from each other, they were numbered within the groups (from A1 to A7, from B1 to B6, C1 to C6). Having changed the participants' names to pseudonyms before the analysis reduced being biased as no connection with a certain identity could be drawn.

A comparative analysis and an abductive coding approach were applied to find common patterns and differences in the data sets (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The comparative analysis was guided by the flip flop technique in which opposites of concepts are used to identify meaning (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For instance, distinctions were made between intrinsic motives and extrinsic motives as well as positive and negative perceptions on product and brand levels.

For abductive codification, both categories emerged deductively based on the theoretical framework and inductively based on the empirical material. Before codification, the empirical material was reviewed to detach ambiguities and the context-dependent nature (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Overall categories, sub-categories, and codes were recorded in a coding frame (Appendix 5). The abductive process involved several iterations between theory and empirical data (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022). Even though abductive reasoning is important in interpretive research, it must be acknowledged that this form of qualitative inference is of weak nature (Lipscomb, 2012; Lukka & Modell, 2010). However, as further elaborated in the next section, this qualitative study is not about finding true causalities but rather about exploring a phenomenon.

During the analysis, a focus was set on the individual unit of analysis while simultaneously being open to insights revealed by focus group interactions and resulting group dynamics to not underutilize “the method’s comparative advantages” (Cyr, 2016, p. 242). The fact that interactions did not present the main unit of analysis may have impacted the richness of insights into the participant’s common sensemaking process.

4.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The chosen data collection method and the focus on individuals’ socially constructed perspectives do not allow stating causalities or statistically representative findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Instead of finding the truth, the focus of this research project was to gain richly descriptive examples of how NIVEA’s SC is understood by consumers. Focusing on NIVEA makes this case study particularistic and low in generalizability, but much can be learned since it is a brand rich in tradition with a broad product assortment and consumers of all ages, genders, and nationalities. The resulting context-dependent knowledge can be transferred to the SC of other global brands and serves as valuable guidance for practitioners and as a direction for future research.

The methodology of focus group interviews is often criticized for its limited reliability and validity, among others due to risks of social pressure and a biased moderator (Wilkinson, 1998). Though these conventional criteria cannot be applied to qualitative research in the same sense as to quantitative methods as there is no certainty “that truth has been attained in any particular instance” (Vermeire et al., 2002, p. 105), the two risks are addressed in the following. The topic of sustainability may not be a personally sensitive one, but a sustainable behavior or interest in reaching sustainable consumption may be socially desired. Thus, implying unsustainable

practices or disinterest might want to be avoided for fear of negative reactions. The risk of socially desirable responses was reduced by a pleasant atmosphere created by the moderator. The risk of a biased author must also be acknowledged in this study as she interned in NIVEA's communication department in the past. This may lead to the subjectivity of the author, meaning emphasizing certain aspects while ignoring others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Being aware of this risk, the author maintained a professional distance during data collection and analysis and acted according to the principles of research integrity such as honesty and fairness (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Further, as already mentioned, the study was conducted without cooperation with NIVEA to ensure independence and increase trustworthiness.

Ethical issues considered a confidential treatment of data as well as voluntary and anonymous participation. Participants signed consent before participation, informing them about the method, purpose, benefits, and anonymous data usage (Appendix 3). As anonymous data usage was ensured to make participants untraceable, a validation check of the transcripts was not necessary. Further, the analysis only involves quotes without identifiable information. As participants represented a cross-cultural sampling, sensitivity toward cultural expressions was required (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

5. Findings

Data analysis of the focus group interviews provided insights into the consumers’ sense-making process of SC and their perceptions of brand authenticity. Deductive categories derived from the theoretical framework are types of cues based on Morhart et al. (2015) and perceived motives based on Cinelli and LeBoeuf (2020). Inductive categories based on the empirical material present first associations with the NIVEA brand, the participants’ prior awareness of NIVEA’s SC, positive and negative perceptions on product and brand level, as well as challenges and potentials for improvement. As figure 3 shows, indexical, iconic and existential cues (as antecedents) were extracted referring to shown SC examples and understood as leading to positive and negative perceptions on brand and product level (as outcome). Each cue was coded two-dimensional (authentic vs. inauthentic) as, in this study, a simple notion of cues is not per se a perception of authenticity, but only if cues are perceived as true (to ideal, to self, to fact).

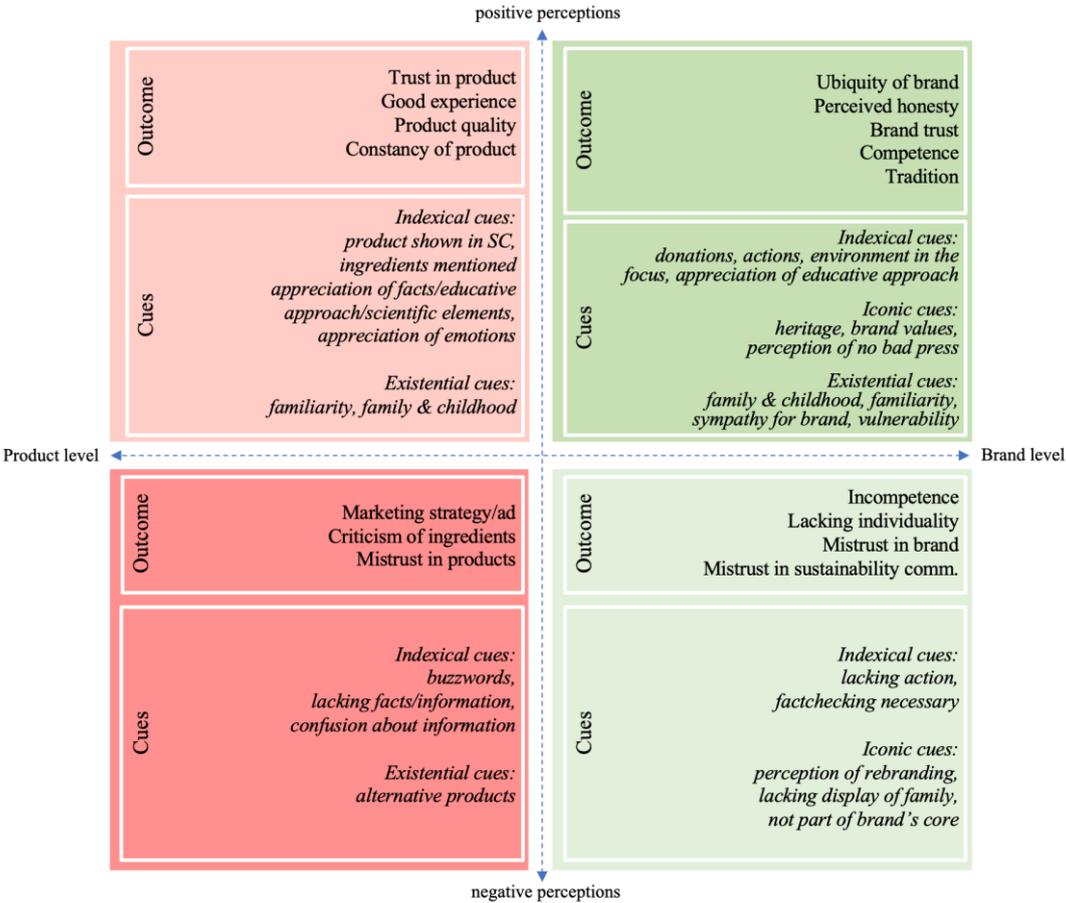


Figure 3: Abductive coding scheme including theory and empirical material

This chapter introduces findings separated into three themes: Firstly, the two-fold role of the brand's strong tradition is presented. Secondly, a closer look is taken at how consumers perceive NIVEA's motivations when communicating about its sustainability efforts. Lastly, a range of identified paradoxes in consumers' perceptions of SC⁶ is introduced.

5.1 Tradition as a mixed blessing

Participants' first associations with NIVEA focus on assets like family (grandparents), home, quality, and the NIVEA creme in a blue tin with its distinctive scent. All associations with NIVEA are positive and related to the aspect of tradition. NIVEA products, especially the NIVEA creme, have been used across several prior generations and are known since childhood, which makes the brand highly traditional and familiar for participants:

I [associate NIVEA] with traditional or familiar, because the creme has always been around in my parents' house and my dad still uses it. So, for me, it is a brand that has always been there for so long. (Participant B6)

As participants and their ancestors could rely on the brand and its products for several years, perceptions of honesty and trust in the brand are expressed:

I have a very good feeling about the company or I think it is somehow honest because I know it since I [was] a child and I used the products for a very long time and there wasn't any negative press about this company. (Participant C1)

That there are no scandal or bad press connected with NIVEA supports brand trust and perceived honesty for participants B3, B6, C1, C2, and C3.

The traditional aspect is reflected in product usage. For instance, participant A4 still uses NIVEA products because she adopted them from prior generations: "Maybe it is also because of tradition that I am still using it because I never looked for something else". But, as participant A7 shows, some consumers would not start using new NIVEA products such as sustainable innovations, as there are more trustworthy alternatives from younger companies:

I wouldn't buy [NIVEA] products at home anymore [only abroad] because there are other brands that I would connect more with sustainability regarding the brand's mission and the

⁶ In this chapter, SC refers to the examples shown during the interviews (Appendix 1).

products. The ingredients put in it are more climate-neutralized and there is not so much stuff in it [as in NIVEA products]. Because I associate NIVEA more with [that] there is a lot in it and I completely lost the overview of what is in there and what my body really needs.

The interviewed NIVEA consumers tend to keep buying the same NIVEA products as they had a good experience with them over several years, just as participant A7 who values that she “can find the sun lotion in the shops [abroad] and [is] happy to find a sun lotion which [she] can trust because [she] feels like [her] body is used to it” (Participant A7).

Participants even tend to talk about NIVEA in a general way for all consumers, assuming a natural knowledge of the brand in the sense that “everyone is using it and everyone knows it, it is like home [...]. Everyone has it at home” (Participant A3) and “in Germany, a lot of people grew up with [NIVEA]” (Participant A6). Participant A1 even assumes “in general, people believe in the brand because most people [...] know it since they were kids and have seen their families using it”. Taking the brand for granted and perceiving ubiquity of the brand since childhood support perceptions of trust and familiarity:

They have a good image across all generations, at least in Germany. I never heard anyone saying that NIVEA is not good. Every time I am visiting friends, everyone has the little blue box with the creme in the bathroom. (Participant C2)

In sum, the brand’s tradition and familiarity combined with the constancy of the products and perceptions of no bad press let the brand appear trustworthy and honest to participants. However, this attitude does not apply to NIVEA’s SC. Firstly, most participants are not familiar with NIVEA’s sustainability efforts, feel uncertain about it, or cannot even draw any connection between the brand and sustainability. Secondly, participants partly show suspicion and mistrust regarding the brand’s sustainability initiatives. Participant A2 provides a drastic view that suggests the brand’s tradition as a challenge for credible sustainability engagement:

For the brand to stand out [...], they have to do something extra. Especially, because they have like this very old traditional focus. [...] for me, it is very much that they are trying to just compete with other brands when focusing on sustainability. [...] there is missing some kind of new branding or something that makes them stand out.

The two-sidedness of the tradition is also indirectly expressed by participant A4:

I feel like it is maybe more trust in the products because you know the products for so long and you know a lot of people are using the products, but I don't know if I would trust in the mission of being more sustainable.

Even though criticality towards NIVEA's sustainability efforts increased in the course of the interviews the attitude towards NIVEA, in general, did not change. This points to a manifested, solid brand image among participants. Some participants (A6, B6, C5) began to question their trust in the brand as they became aware that they do not know what their trust is based on or realized it is simply based on the brand's long tradition.

Participants A4, A7, B2, B4, and C1 draw comparisons between NIVEA as a big company and newer, smaller companies or even startups in terms of an honest engagement in sustainability. Sustainability is not regarded as NIVEA's real mission, while smaller companies are perceived as being more idealistic about it and having sustainability at their core.

I think I would only believe that a company is really interested in being sustainable when it is a very small company and there are not thousands of investors that want to make as much money as possible out of this company. (Participant C1)

Against this, participants B6 and C4 regard NIVEA as having a trust advantage compared to smaller companies as the brand is already established and less critically reviewed than startups entering the market.

If you are a startup and you are new to the market, you kind of have to make your way into the market, you have to convince people that the brand is good. I think that people are a bit more skeptical like 'Oh it is new. What is it? What's in there?' [...] NIVEA has an advantage because it has been there for so long and people have trusted in the brand and have grown up with the brand, so it is like 'Oh I trust them'. (Participant B6)

This statement by B6 suggests a skeptical look at the brand's tradition and existing trust as it might lead to people blindly trusting the brand's SC. Unlike startups, NIVEA does not have to assert itself in the market, but the trust already exists and is not questioned, just as its sustainability efforts might not be questioned. Participant A5's view can be considered as a vivid example of this assumption, showing confidence in the sustainability of the products:

If they write on a product 'this is climate-friendly' I have to say I trust them that it is really climate-friendly. I am not sure if it is really climate-neutral or if they pay for any CO2

certificates, but I don't care because it feels better to buy this product [...]. I think that it will be better for the environment than a product that is not green.

5.2 Extrinsic or intrinsic motivation – or both?

Despite the above-mentioned trusting view, participant A5 is also convinced that NIVEA's sustainability efforts are merely "about profit and reaching the younger generation". The perceived extrinsic motivations, meaning behavior driven by external pressure and monetary or reputational reward, do not seem to affect A5's trust in the sustainability of the products. Other participants share this view, even if not in such a drastic way. Even though NIVEA's sustainability efforts are mainly perceived as going with the trend to stay relevant, ensure profit, compete with other brands and fulfill legal requirements, those extrinsic motives are not necessarily perceived negatively and do not exclude intrinsic motives that describe perceiving good intentions of the brand. Rather, participants A3, A4, and A7 regard the company's size and high reach as opportunities to act as a role model to encourage other companies and consumers to become more sustainable as well:

I know NIVEA because my grandparents used to use it and I know it from all around the world. If they change their attitude about sustainability, everyone else should follow because then it is a starting route. [...] So, it is a good thing combined with that they probably want to reach more people to consume their products. (Participant A7)

The strong tradition and product trust lead participants *to want* to believe in NIVEA's sustainability efforts while simultaneously feeling uncertain about it:

I think you have to be honest to yourself and remember it is a profit-oriented company. So, in the first step, they will always do what helps them to make money, to say it that flatly. But I want to believe that they have good intentions and they are surely interested that this planet is alright, but to me, it is jumping on the train. (Participant B6)

Similarly, participant B2 states that she believes in NIVEA's SC because the brand "stands for trust and being honest" while mentioning that trusting NIVEA blindly "might be stupid". Consequently, pure intrinsic motives are critically questioned. Contrary, participant C2 puts the company's establishment in the market in a positive light when stating there is no need for NIVEA to communicate sustainability merely out of reasons for profit as "[NIVEA is] making [its] profit" anyway.

Against the belief that extrinsic and intrinsic motivations can go hand in hand, participant C4 is concerned that the brand’s profit orientation even compromises its change towards higher sustainability and that SC is rather a hygiene factor for NIVEA:

I do believe they only want to be as sustainable as much as it fits into their business portfolio, I don’t expect more from them. [...] Are they willing to become that sustainable that they actually might lose customers because their products become more expensive? I guess they wouldn’t pay this price, they wouldn’t go that far. (Participant C4)

Participants A3, A4, A7, B4, B6, C1, and C3 highlighted that NIVEA has not been founded out of the idealistic motivation to be sustainable as is the case with startups or recently founded (smaller) companies. In comparison, NIVEA is less believable, because “[startups] stand for what they are doing, it is their life, and they are 100% behind it” (Participant B4).

5.3 Paradoxes in perceptions of sustainability communication

Various contradictions and uncertainties evolved during the interviews and marked the participants’ sensemaking process (Weick et al., 2005). Table 1 illustrates identified paradoxes in participants’ perceptions of NIVEA’s SC.

Table 1: Paradoxes in perceptions of sustainability communication

What makes NIVEA’s SC authentic?	What makes NIVEA’s SC inauthentic?
5.3.1 Product vs. brand focus in sustainability communication	
Product as evidence	Product as sales-driven marketing/ad
Brand focus as sustainability in brand core (sustainability linked to NIVEA itself)	Brand focus as (re)branding (reinventing the brand image)
5.3.2 Facts vs. emotions in sustainability communication	
Facts (e.g., ingredients) make SC believable	Facts as buzzwords/empty statements
Emotions have lasting, memorable effects	Emotions are unsubstantial and don’t fit to brand
5.3.3 Perceived (dis)continuity between sustainability communication and NIVEA	
SC fits the brand NIVEA (care value, simplicity, colors)	Confusion about the connection between SC and NIVEA (no individuality, fits every brand)
5.3.4 NIVEA as a <i>silent brand</i>	
The simplicity/characteristic of a „silent brand” made NIVEA succeed over all the years, no bad press/scandal perceived	Not taking a stance makes NIVEA a brand that is not willing to take a risk and started too late with sustainability efforts (laggard)
5.3.5 Challenges as a burden or as a chance	
Acknowledging challenges in becoming sustainable grants NIVEA sympathy	Acknowledging challenges in becoming sustainable makes SC unrealistic

5.3.1 Product vs. brand focus in sustainability communication

There is no agreement among participants on what makes NIVEA's SC (in)authentic. Participants B1, B2, B4, B6, C1, and C2 regard products telling NIVEA's sustainability strategy as evidence of honest sustainability engagement and as encouragement for their own more sustainable consumption. Participant C2 even prefers visiting the store and taking a look at the product and its ingredients as this is more believable "than some words [NIVEA is] stating in [its] advertisements". He argues that "[brands] need to do something when [they] say something".

Against the notion of products as evidence but in agreement with a critical view towards advertisements, participants A3, A4, and A6 perceive displayed products as a marketing strategy or sales-driven advertisement:

Then you have a link to the product and that changes it, I didn't like it in the end. At first, I thought it is so cool because I get this great information and then it is like 'Oh, it is an ad.'
(Participant A3)

Participant A6 is even surprised when no product is shown in one example as she connects social media with the intention to advertise products. The perceived intention to advertise a product to make profit stands in contrast to understanding products as reasons to believe in what is communicated.

Similar differences of opinion apply to the brand focus in SC. For participant B1, the focus on the brand itself makes the communication less believable because it makes her feel as if NIVEA wants to reinvent its image: "Maybe they are actually less sustainable as they are trying it to look like because they are making it a big deal since it is so much about the brand" (Participant B1). This notion may be ascribed to the fact that participant B1 perceives lacking consistency between her existing brand image and the brand's communication as she misses the display of family and togetherness in the examples shown:

The advertisements that I associate with NIVEA, I feel like it is always parents and kids and multiple people involved. And here, here you didn't really see a person, I think we saw multiple hands, but not something like inter-human, interpersonal. I was missing that [...] it felt like more of a rebranding thing. For me, it doesn't fit my older view of NIVEA. I would trust the brand more if I saw families [in the advertisements]. (Participant B1)

Against the notion of a rebranding strategy, participants A6, B4, and B6 think that highlighting the brand's sustainability strategy rather than products increases credibility: "The main point is

the environment and not like ‘this creme is so great for your skin and it gives you a glow’ or whatever. [...] it doesn’t feel like they put their product in the focus” (Participant B6). Participant A6 feels that a focus on the brand “is more about NIVEA itself” and - other than participant B1 - notices the link between caring for the skin and caring for the environment that is communicated by NIVEA’s “One skin. One planet. One care.”-campaign.

Similarly, participant B6 does not regard the promotion of products as necessary as NIVEA is “well-known and so established in the market. [SC] is just to do something for [the] image”. According to participant C2, NIVEA does not have the temporal pressure as other brands to get engaged in sustainability to reach acceptance and legitimacy due to its familiarity across all generations and its huge market share.

The contradictory perceptions of a brand and product focus in NIVEA’s SC are illustrated in figure 4.

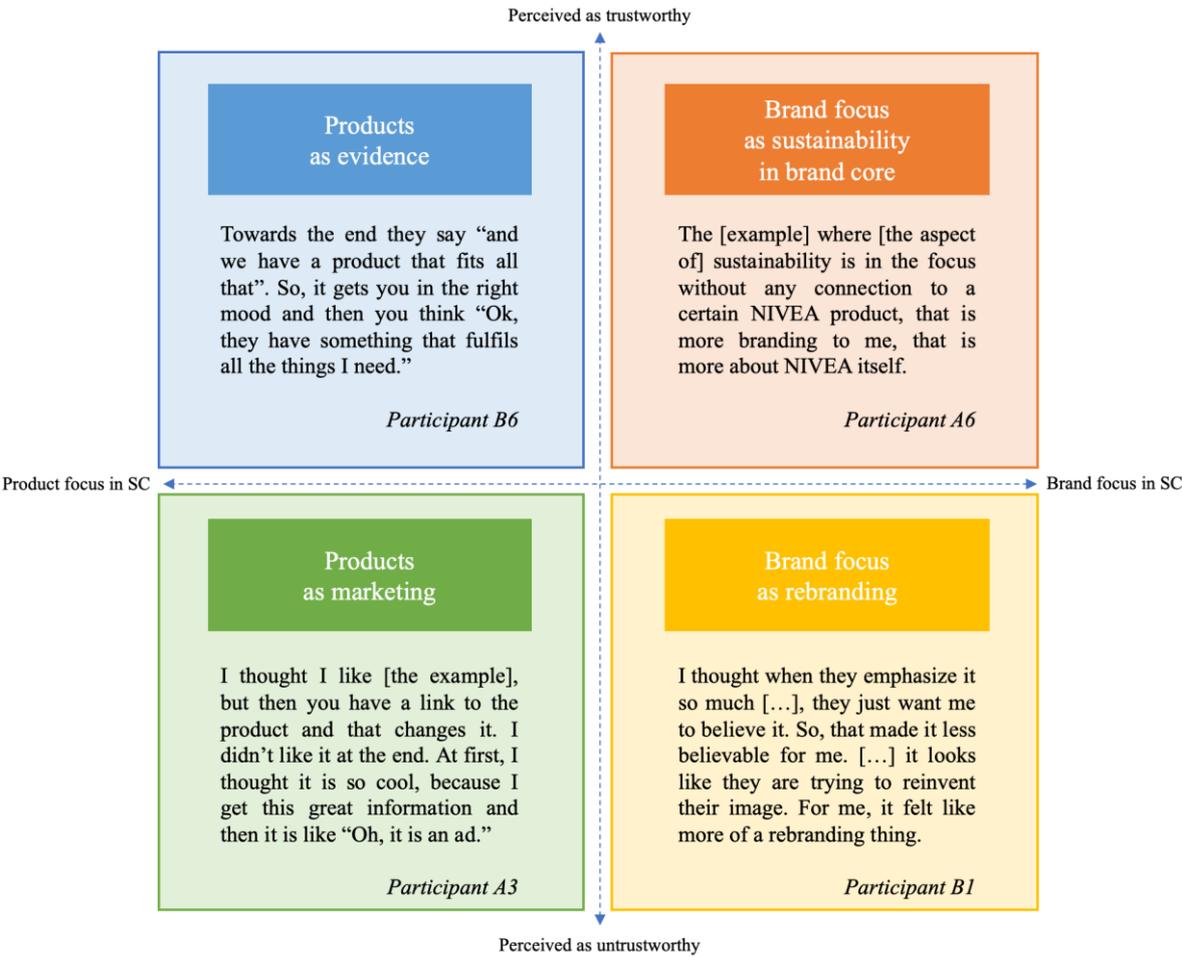


Figure 4: Paradox of Product vs. brand focus in SC

5.3.2 *Facts vs. emotions in sustainability communication*

Besides the distinction between brand focus and product focus, participants differentiate between facts and emotions expressed in SC. On the one hand, facts about the brand's sustainability efforts support perceptions of honesty, reliability, and trustworthiness. Especially information about sustainability initiatives and educative elements is appreciated by participants (A6, A7, B1, B2, B3, C3, and C4) because they get a feeling of what NIVEA is doing and perceive the brand as a competent actor:

All these facts and the distinction [between climate-neutral and climate-neutralized] make me [...] feel like 'I can trust you and you know what you are doing and you give us a deep dive into the topic and you have figured it out.' It is convincing. (Participant A6)

On the other hand, facts are perceived as either meaningless, superficial buzzwords by consumers without deep knowledge of sustainability (Participants B1, C3, and C5) or as *fishy arguments* by more educated consumers such as participant C4 with a chemical background. Participant C4 explains that terms perceived as buzzwords have a scientific basis, but became meaningless "as every company is using these words".

In general, participants look at sustainability in the skincare sector with a suspicious mind mentioning that its communication sometimes looks like greenwashing (Participants B2, B3, and B6), facts are needed to evaluate claims (Participants A5, A6, A7, B2, B3, B6, C2, C3, C4, C5, and C6) and SC must be understandable instead of "praying buzzwords" (Participants B1, C3, and C5). With NIVEA's communication efforts, participants demand more facts such as concrete numbers on emission reduction and information about production processes, resources needed, and concrete steps taken: "They are saying 'we are reducing the carbon emissions', but they don't say how much. I don't see any numbers or data. So, it is difficult for me [to believe]" (Participant C2). However, additional information provided in small print at the bottom (asterisks) is regarded with suspicion by participants C1, C2, and C5 as it suggests invalidity or amendment of statements. Further, motivation to gain more information varies: While some participants would research and check facts as a basis to make judgments (Participants B1, B3, B4), participant B2 needs information easily reachable such as on product packages.

Perceptions of lacking facts are accompanied by perceptions of empty statements for participant C1: "They do not fully describe what they understand by '100% recyclable'. So, it is like just using this buzzword but not really explaining what this means". Participant B6 shares this skepticism that increases during the interview:

At a first glance, I am [...] impressed by the scientific words. They talk about that they are reducing emissions and they are doing something to be more sustainable. But [at a second glance] I was wondering what are they doing exactly. They say they have this [climate-neutralized] product but what makes it climate-neutralized? How do they achieve that?

Participants want to be informed about steps toward long-term sustainability, objectives, and achievements instead of being confronted with empty or not understandable statements.

For me, it is important when I see [...] communication about [sustainability efforts], that I understand what [it actually means] and that I don't see twenty buzzwords that mean nothing to me. (Participant C5)

Understandability however seems to vary between consumers, meaning that what is understandable for one participant, might be too complex for another. For instance, participant C2 clearly demands “numbers or data” but when being provided with a concrete number (“aluminum can be made of 25% recycled material”), he feels uncertain about how to evaluate it and how to define a *sustainable product*: “I cannot say if this is enough to have a sustainable product”. Participant C5 regards herself as not experienced enough to judge “whether [statements] are buzzwords or whether it actually means something”. Participant B1 demands:

The way [NIVEA] communicate[s] it must be on an appropriate level because I don't know much about ingredients and if you are not from the field, you might not know what the words mean. So, [...] a fact [needs to be] broken down to a level that the average non-chemical studied customers understand.

Besides understandable information, participants (A5, B1, and C1) perceive admitting flaws and challenges positively. By communicating that NIVEA is not climate-neutral but climate-neutralized, the brand “say[s] something negative about [itself,] that [it is] not able to produce [its] products without CO2 emissions” (Participant C1). In doing so, the brand makes itself vulnerable which is perceived as genuine by participants A5, B1, and C1.

While facts are highly appreciated by consumers, NIVEA's rather emotional message to the planet (“It's high time I gave something back to you [planet]. Gratitude, attention and respect. And all my love.”) is criticized by participants A5, A6, B1, B2, and C3: “There is no product shown, there is no evidence. It is more like blabla. They say the planet is important, but everybody says it” (Participant B2). Participant A5 adds that “it is easy to say I give something back to the environment, we can all say ‘I don't grab a plastic bag’”. Besides questioning the statements, the pure emotional focus is perceived as not fitting to NIVEA (Participants A3, A7, B2,

B3, B5, B6, C1, C4). Even if emotions seem to make a first positive impression on participant A3, the content is questioned as soon as she reviews it. When trying to express an opinion about the genuineness of SC, facts are consulted as a starting point while emotions are merely perceived positively when not trying to evaluate the content. As participant B5 puts it: “If you are tired, [...] you may feel that it is authentic, because [...] you don’t think more about it”.

5.3.3 Perceived (dis)continuity of NIVEA’s sustainability communication

Some participants perceive NIVEA’s SC as a misfit to their own image of NIVEA (discontinuity), while others look at the SC as the brand being faithful towards itself (continuity). In terms of discontinuity, participant B1 misses the display of family and togetherness that she strongly connects with NIVEA and participants A3, A7, B2, B3, B5, B6, C1, and C4 are irritated by the emotional message to the planet. Neither can they draw a connection to NIVEA nor to the skincare sector: “You don’t really think about skincare. It does not really fit the brand itself” (Participant B3) and it was “some basic stuff without a real connection to NIVEA, it was stock footages, this typical music” (Participant C1). Participant C4 feels a lack of individuality as the ad could fit “every brand to frame [itself] as being sustainable”.

Though some participants cannot draw a connection between the SC and the brand, participants A1, A6, A7, B2, B4, and B6 still perceive continuity in terms of visual features (blue color and circled shape) and brand values (care and simplicity). Participant B6 “really liked how the earth changed into the blue NIVEA circle that is so familiar” and thought “oh it is NIVEA, of course it is!” She adds:

To me, at the core, it still feels like NIVEA, because for me, NIVEA is kind of pure and I felt that too. It wasn’t too much. The colors were still kind of this blueish, white, not too much, not pink or whatever. (Participant B6)

Continuity in terms of simplicity is also perceived by participant C6, however, she relates it to the brand’s values instead of the outward appearance: “NIVEA always portrays itself in advertisements as something very neutral or something very friendly”. This view is shared by participant A1: “I think what helps NIVEA is that these actions [SC] are aligned with its values [care]. [...] I think it feels more genuine” and by participant B2: “They have strong values that they kept over the years. [...] they are still what they have been before, so still authentic”.

5.3.4 NIVEA as a silent brand

Participants (B3, B6, C1, C2, and C3) perceive NIVEA as a nice and sympathetic brand that never had any scandals:

I trust them more than other companies in the skincare sector because I have never heard bad news [...]. So, maybe it is the traditional image of NIVEA with no negative news about the brand why I have more trust in it than in other companies. (Participant C2)

However, the perceived brand's neutrality is not valued positively by all participants as the brand "[does] not talk loud about what they are doing" (Participant C2) and "doesn't take a stance" (Participant C6). Participant C2 comes up with describing NIVEA as a "silent brand" with which participant C5 agrees:

I don't think NIVEA is a forcible, super hardcore, energetic brand that put itself out there every day with a lot of input. I also feel that it is more of a silent brand that manages to stick for all these decades in this way.

The *silent* character of the brand leads to SC without a memorable effect on consumers:

It is always a very friendly, decent brand that sometimes doesn't take a stance. So, I think that problem also reflects the way they are doing sustainability ads. This is also very nicely made but I feel like there is nothing stuck. (Participant C6)

Participants seem to miss an individual factor in the SC that makes NIVEA stand out from other brands. This adds to the notion of NIVEA as a laggard that "jumped on the train a bit too late [...]. They didn't pay attention to it for such a long time and now they do it because they are forced to do it" (Participant A7). Thus, the temporal aspect (i.e., the starting point of engagement in SC) appears to be a relevant factor for consumers.

5.3.5 Challenges as a burden or as a chance

A further paradox identified is provided by the participants' awareness of challenges that NIVEA is facing in becoming more sustainable, such as the tightrope walk between staying in the tradition and changing, constraints that come with the skincare sector itself (e.g., supply chain, high costs), staying relevant for younger consumers, and competing with newer, smaller companies: "I think [standing out with SC] is hard, especially for

NIVEA, because they don't have sustainability in their brand base [...] like other brands that are newer" (Participant C3).

On the one hand, being aware of challenges partly goes with questioning the brand's trustworthiness as it is not regarded as realistic that NIVEA is able to handle all challenges (Participant C5). On the other hand, NIVEA is appreciated for trying to become more sustainable even though challenges complicate the way: "I mean [NIVEA] can't do everything because it is beauty products but at least they try to change and [admitting flaws in SC] felt more appropriate or real" (Participant A7). Participant C2 supports this view when expressing his dislike of creating "a fully sustainable image" without "[taking] care of what is true and what is not". As stated before, admitting challenges and weaknesses (e.g., stating that products are climate-neutralized instead of climate-neutral) is perceived as honest by participants (A5, A7, B1, C1, and C2) as it makes the brand more human and vulnerable instead of pretending perfection.

6. Discussion & Conclusion

A detailed analysis has been conducted to understand how consumers⁷ make sense of NIVEA's SC based on their authenticity perceptions of the brand. This chapter aims to provide an answer to the research question, interprets findings in the light of previous research, and gives practical recommendations for communication professionals engaging in SC.

6.1 Contribution to Research and Theory

The analysis confirms brand authenticity as an ambiguous concept arising from an interplay of different types of cues. To perceive the overall brand as honest, trustworthy, and competent, participants draw on facts and educative/scientific elements (indexical cues), commitment to brand values (care) and perceptions of no bad press (iconic cue) as well as the brand's familiarity and memories of their childhood (existential cue).

Participants do not merely form PBA based on cues extracted from provided information, but in some cases conclude that provided information is lacking cues to make valid judgments (e.g., B2: "it is hard to tell just by seeing [SC] on Instagram"). Thus, drawing on cues can result in perceiving a lack of cues in the sensemaking process, concluding that further factors (e.g., across channel SC) must be considered. Also, even though there has been a scandal in 2017 related to the "White is Purity"-campaign⁸ in the middle eastern market, European consumers do not seem to be aware of it – either because it has not been an issue of great consternation in the European market or the tradition and trust outweighed the negative press for participants.

Overall, based on previous research findings, it can be stated that participants evaluate NIVEA's brand authenticity positively. Scholars stated a reciprocal relationship between brand authenticity and brand trust (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Portal et al., 2019; Pratomo & Magetsari, 2020) and described perceptions of a brand as competent and the display of

⁷ *Consumers* refers to participants of this study as no generalization to all consumers of NIVEA can be made.

⁸ BBC News. (2017, April 4). Nivea removes 'white is purity' deodorant advert branded 'racist'.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39489967>

organizational values in SC as supportive for PBA (Diers-Lawson et al., 2020; Portal et al., 2019). However, the brand's tradition has another side of the coin, making it more difficult for NIVEA to engage in sustainability authentically. Referring to Diers-Lawson et al. (2020), the manifested brand image - which participant A2 describes as an "old traditional focus" - is a critical factor for perceptions of CSR (in)authenticity. Participants do not seem convinced that such a traditional and historic brand can become truly sustainable. As elaborated upon in section 6.2, this poses a tightrope walk to NIVEA between staying true to itself and breaking out of the tradition.

Findings further confirm brand authenticity as a multidimensional concept. During the sensemaking process of SC, participants referred to the dimensions of *reliability* (Bruhn et al., 2012), *continuity* (Bruhn et al., 2012; Morhart et al., 2015; Portal et al., 2019), *individuality* (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019; Portal et al., 2019; Schallehn et al., 2014), and *credibility* (Morhart et al., 2015; Portal et al., 2019). *Reliability* was expressed in terms of good experience with the products for several years and worldwide accessibility. *Continuity*, *credibility*, and *individuality* were perceived both positively and negatively. Though brand values and visual features correspond to NIVEA from a consumer perspective (*continuity*), the emotional tonality of SC is perceived as not fitting the brand (*discontinuity*). Similarly, participants perceive distinct visual features (blue color and circled shape) but simultaneously criticize NIVEA for not standing out from the floods of sustainability claims and merely going with the trend. While some participants perceive NIVEA's sustainability claims as credible, others consider statements as unsubstantial buzzwords.

Findings show that there is no perfection regarding sustainability. Both extracted cues from SC and assessing brand authenticity dimensions differ between consumers, showing that brand authenticity is perceived subjectively. Thus, the trial to evoke specific dimensions in the consumers' minds can easily end up in someone's negative perception of those.

Going beyond previous research, the findings of this study imply further dimensions and antecedents perceived and attributed to by consumers when evaluating SC:

- *the brand's familiarity* (NIVEA has always been there for many generations and is used by everyone in the surrounding)
- *the brand's vulnerability through SC* (e.g., by admitting flaws/weaknesses/challenges)
- *comprehensibility of SC* (whether facts and information are understandable for consumer's respective background knowledge in sustainability)

- *temporal factor regarding the brand's engagement in sustainability* (starting point compared to competitors: role model vs. laggard)

As mentioned in the literature review, Safeer et al. (2021) made a distinction between a subjective and an objective approach to brand authenticity, referring to the consumers' identity and the information provided as influential factors for the assessment of brand authenticity. The findings of this study claim, that an integrated approach must be pursued that includes strategically selected information based on the consumers' identity to serve the different target groups. Additionally, the two perspectives must be complemented with further factors setting a baseline for SC, such as connotations with a big company (e.g., profit-oriented, many investors), characteristics of the sector (e.g., supply chain in skincare branch), and connotations with a sector. For instance, a clean energy company might be more positively connotated in terms of sustainability than a company from the automotive or aviation sector. Another factor presents the enterprise to which a brand belongs (here: Beiersdorf AG). Depending on its reputation and history, linking the brand with its parent company might impact PBA positively or negatively.

Hereby, contributing to previous literature on extrinsic and intrinsic motivations (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020; Diers-Lawson et al., 2020), this study shows that negative connotations (i.e., extrinsic motivations such as profit orientation) are not always negatively perceived. Rather, participants show understanding for a profit orientation as it is essential for NIVEA's existence and mention that it can go hand in hand with intrinsic intentions, such as taking responsibility and being a role model. Consequently, if extrinsic motives of a brand provide a chance to do good or make a positive impact, they do not have to be regarded negatively by consumers concerning the authenticity of the brand.

Taking a closer look at the sensemaking process, findings show that it is marked by contradictions and uncertainty. During the interviews, *sense* was not reached resembling Weick's (1995) notion of *plausibility* (comprehension), but in the form of raised awareness and increased criticality towards SC in general and SC by NIVEA. Participants realized that they do not know what their brand trust is based on and that they must look at SC more critically. Consequently, sensemaking in this study did not result in shared understanding but evolved in becoming aware of NIVEA's SC and sharing a variety of meanings. This demonstrates the ongoing characteristic of sensemaking as described by Weick (1995), whereas the interviews can be regarded as a trigger for the participants' sensemaking process of NIVEA's SC: "In the future, I will take a

closer look if it makes sense what they are writing on the products and if it is really sustainable or just buzzwords” (Participant C1).

Besides the ongoing aspect, the retrospective and social characteristics of sensemaking became obvious during the interviews. Firstly, participants refer back to their grandparents and childhood when evaluating NIVEA’s authenticity. Secondly, participants partly reconsider or question their view based on arguments of others, such as participant B2 who shows uncertainty because of the high criticality of others but finally sticks to her perceptions of trust and honesty. This also shows that the retrospective character of sensemaking can be to a different extent. It can reach back years (e.g., memories of childhood shaping brand perceptions), but also take place within a discussion (e.g., evaluating statements after feedback).

Supporting the retrospective character, a future orientation guided the participants’ assumptions about NIVEA’s motives (investment into the future, reaching the younger generation), the brand’s competence to make a difference, and challenges awaiting the brand. These arguments point to a prospective sensemaking process.

6.2 Practical Implications for NIVEA

Findings lead to the conclusion that there is no silver bullet to achieving authenticity perceptions in SC because consumers value different aspects and perceive claims subjectively. What is perceived as honest by one consumer, might be considered dishonest by another. Nevertheless, concrete aspects emerged from the interviews that must be managed by NIVEA.

The participants’ statements imply that NIVEA is undergoing a transformation among the younger target group from a traditional and valued high-quality brand to a brand that is taken for granted and does not keep up with younger brands/smaller companies in terms of sustainability. Participants mainly use NIVEA products out of tradition and habit, but their attention to newer products from the brand is rather low. They are even unfamiliar with NIVEA’s sustainability efforts.

Currently, NIVEA benefits from its trust advantage among consumers which is based on passing on the brand from generation to generation (tradition), but what if the tradition may not be passed on to the next generation at some point? A rethinking is taking place among younger consumers and with the increasing concern about the environment, they partly turn to alternative products from brands that were founded out of the idealistic motivation to make the world more sustainable. With NIVEA’s *silent* character (or less aggressive SC), the trust in a traditional brand may be no longer sufficient to keep/attract generations. It is important that NIVEA

does not rely on its positive reputation and being passed on through generations, but consumers must be made more aware that NIVEA is taking the challenging path to sustainability and is in no way inferior to smaller companies/startups in regards to sustainability.

Looking at NIVEA’s parent company’s core values of *care*, *simplicity*, *trust*, and *courage*, it becomes obvious that the former three values are identified by participants, while *courage* does not seem to be present enough to be noticed. One can assume that a too strong focus on *simplicity* is at the expense of *courage*, meaning that remaining neutral lets the brand appearing conservative, cautious, and *silent*. Table 2 further elaborates on this observation.

Table 2: Beiersdorf’s core values from NIVEA consumer perspective

Beiersdorf’s core values ⁹	Consumer perceptions on brand level	Consumer perceptions on SC level
Care	Care value is recognized by participants and perceived as sympathetic and nice	Care value is appreciated in SC as connecting it with the brand (caring for the skin and caring for the environment)
Simplicity	Simplicity of the brand over several years is appreciated by participants due to no bad press/scandal	Simplicity in SC is regarded as fitting to NIVEA, but also criticized as „not taking a stance”, being a “silent brand” that does not stand out from other brands
Trust	Trust in the brand is expressed by participants	Trust in SC is only partially shown, participants rather show mistrust in claims
Courage	Courage is rarely mentioned in connection with the brand (only by participant B2 who regards NIVEA’s objective as „ambitious” and perceives the brand as caring „more than other brands”)	Courage is rarely perceived in NIVEA’s SC. Participants value NIVEA admitting flaws (climate-neutralized instead of climate-neutral) but miss NIVEA taking a stance and doubt its will to take a risk (e.g., loose consumers)

Clearly, NIVEA has to focus on winning over the younger target group to keep going the brand’s tradition with the next generations as the tradition turned out to as the brand’s most valuable asset. Therefore, the brand must adapt to the younger generation’s consumption demand and move its sustainable transformation into their field of view.

The interviews showed that participants seek to be part of NIVEA’s journey. Detailed information, such as facts, numbers, production processes, concrete measures, and achievements, is no longer only of interest to selected individuals, such as inventors, but also to more educated, critical, and information-seeking consumers. Hereby, transparency is key.

⁹ *Our Core Values*. (n.d.). <https://www.beiersdorf.com/about-us/unser-profil/our-core-values>

The sustainability report of NIVEA's parent company Beiersdorf demonstrated a high commitment to facing the issue of sustainability and dealing with climate change by mentioning concrete measures, achievements, and targets. Additionally, when being featured in the #Vision2045 documentary series by TBD Media Group¹⁰, at the time data collection of study was completed, the company states to consider sustainable transformation as part of the company's long-term strategy, affecting the whole organization (R&D, supply chain, marketing). According to CEO Vincent Warnery, Beiersdorf aims to act as an inspiring role model for competitors: "The job of a company like ours is to invest in the future, to put the right ambition and the right commitment into making the planet a better place" (TBD Media Group, 2022). Many aspects targeted by Beiersdorf already were missed in NIVEA's SC by participants of this study. Beiersdorf's efforts do not seem to be visible to NIVEA's consumers as they are not communicated via the brand, meaning that the link between the parent company and the brand is missing in NIVEA's SC. This is problematic as NIVEA is closer to its consumers than the enterprise behind the brand. Creating a stronger and more transparent link between Beiersdorf's ambitions and the brand enables consumers to be more aware and follow the company's or brand's development.

Overall, the findings confirm the high relevance of the strategic aspect of communication to reach authentic SC and demonstrate that SC should be managed as a strategic function. It is advisable to create a stronger focus on brand communication (PR) to increase awareness, anchor sustainability more in the brand's core to stand out, and build mutually beneficial relationships with consumers. Engaging in dialogue with consumers is helpful to get to know their needs, interests, and perspectives and include those in the strategy formulation. This way, consumers are involved in the sustainability journey and given a voice. By taking sustainability seriously, both NIVEA and its consumers can benefit, for instance by feeling good as a consumer and being proud of the impact as a company. It drives consumers' perceptions of trust in NIVEA and accountability for NIVEA's sustainability efforts.

Additionally, consumer research via surveys and environmental scanning are useful strategic approaches to SC to facilitate target-group-specific communication. Scanning the environment

¹⁰ TBD Media Group. (2022). Can one of the biggest skin care companies in the world reduce its environmental footprint? Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/brandfeature/tbd-media-group/can-one-of-the-biggest-skin-care-companies-in-the-world-reduce-its-environmental-footprint?ref=https%3A%2F%2Flnkw.co%2FBeiersdorf1>

can further enrich knowledge about competitors' strategies (e.g., startups or smaller companies) as well as developments, regulations, and innovations regarding sustainability (e.g., raw material prices and packaging materials) (Beal, 2000). Although Beiersdorf regularly conducts a materiality analysis as a strategic tool to identify issues that are most important for both the brand and its consumers¹¹, an additional stronger focus on NIVEA consumers and their interests would be useful to ensure that NIVEA's SC only includes relevant aspects instead of focusing on "trending" topics.

This study demonstrates that it is not only a journey to become sustainable as an organization but also to manifest the sustainable image in the consumer's mind - especially when a concrete (traditional) brand image is already anchored. It turned out to be important that NIVEA stands out in the floods of SC that consumers are facing and break out of its traditional image to a certain extent. The traditional NIVEA creme in the blue tin, which has existed continuously since 1911, represented a strong iconic cue that resembles the brand's essence for many participants. However, the perceived brand's uniqueness that was associated with this product does not seem to be represented in NIVEA's SC. As Schallehn et al. (2014) stated, sustainability must be anchored in the core of an organization's strategy to stand out from competing brands. To implement sustainability in the brand's core and give NIVEA an individual character, it would be beneficial to discuss the sustainability of this most traditional product (and even try to make it sustainable). This way, the brand's tradition can be kept while being innovative concerning sustainable solutions. Derived from the potential for improvement mentioned by consumers and identified challenges in NIVEA's SC, further practical recommendations are proposed in table 3.

¹¹ (*Materiality Analysis*, n.d.). Beiersdorf.Com. <https://www.beiersdorf.com/sustainability/our-commitment/materiality-analysis>

Table 3: Challenges and possible responses for NIVEA engaging in SC

Challenges regarding SC	Possible responses through SC
Consumers lack awareness of SC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on physical appearance in the stores: Promote sustainability on and through products (packaging material) at the point of sale (turned out as important touchpoints for consumers) - Promote ads on social media to reach consumers not following NIVEA's profile or not being highly active on Instagram - More brand communication (PR) to manifest sustainability in connection with NIVEA in consumers' minds
Consumers miss individuality in SC and don't recognize the brand in its SC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clearer positioning to stand out from floods of sustainability claims (e.g., draw comparisons to competitive products, demonstrate the innovative history of the company) - More brand communication (PR) to anchor sustainability in the brand's core - Set an example by making the traditional NIVEA creme sustainable since this product resembles the brand's core
Consumers perceive scientific terms as buzzwords and don't believe statements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clarify the sender of a message to highlight credibility (rather sustainability experts than the marketing department) - Explain <i>buzzwords</i> to reach a scientific/factual basis - Provide insights into production processes - Satisfy increasingly educated consumers' need for more information (e.g., sustainability report for consumers, provide orientation with scale regarding emissions) - Show the will to take a (economic) risk in favor of sustainability (e.g. losing consumers by reinventing traditional products)
Consumers question NIVEA's commitment and the will to make (economic) sacrifices to become more sustainable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Highlight achievements and concrete actions in SC as proof - Communicate challenges and how NIVEA tries to manage them transparently to gain understanding - Engage in two-way-communication/dialogue with consumers to involve them in sustainability strategy - Turn negatively perceived company's size into an advantage by communicating that it is a chance to really have an impact on the sector's sustainability - Create a stronger link between the ambitions of the parent company (Beiersdorf) and the brand - Demonstrate how sustainability guides the different internal organizational departments (sustainable business strategy)
Difficult to satisfy consumers with different background knowledge (chemists vs. nitwits) and preferences (emotional inspiration vs. facts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Target-group specific communication through environmental scanning and consumer research (strategic approach to SC) - Materiality analysis to ensure only communicating relevant aspects instead of "trending" topics - Conduct workshops/webinars with consumers on sustainable consumption to educate them, show competence, and involve them in NIVEA's journey

6.3 Limitations

It is important to note the limitations of this research. Firstly, the sample provided several weaknesses. It was not of high diversity in terms of gender and nationality as participants were mainly females (79% of participants) and to a high extent Germans (47% of participants). This may be due to the fact that NIVEA is a beauty brand and owned by a German company. Consequently, there might have been a cultural bias in how SC and brand authenticity were perceived. Further, two participants turned out to have been in a working relationship with NIVEA before. Even though they enriched the discussion by providing insights, they might have had a biased perception of the brand and its SC. Due to the fact that participants are following NIVEA on Instagram, they presumably have a more positive brand image or are more inclined towards the brand than people consuming NIVEA products but not following the brand on social media.

Secondly, although the study aimed to investigate NIVEA's holistic SC across channels, SC examples shown during the interviews were extracted from NIVEA's official Instagram account. Originally, the examples were intended as triggers but turned out to have a leading role due to the consumers' lacking awareness of NIVEA' SC. As Pittman et al. (2022) stated, brand authenticity perceptions might differ between channels and thus, perceiving SC on Instagram in a certain way may not mean that it is perceived the same way on TV or alternative channels. Consequently, the findings of this study primarily need to be recognized in the context of SC via Instagram.

Thirdly, speaking of advertising channels, the study did not examine the participants' media consumption. Though all participants seemed to be active on social media as they were recruited via the platform, activity levels seemed to differ from frequently using Instagram to not being active on it. This might have impacted the participants' awareness of NIVEA's SC and the way how critical people evaluate the content on social media.

Findings and limitations call for further research that is defined in the next section.

6.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Given the increasing relevance of being sustainable as an organization, the findings and limitations of this study provide suggestions for future research.

As mentioned at the beginning, previous research did not examine the concepts of brand authenticity and SC in combination from a consumer perspective. As this study is qualitative and therefore, no statistically significant findings and causalities can be determined, future

research can quantitatively support findings and assumptions from this study and provide deeper theoretical knowledge on the relationship between the constructs of PBA and SC. For instance, examining how different cues extracted from SC (facts, emotions, achievements, etc.) influence PBA can lead to reliable recommendations for communication professionals. The other way around, examining how PBA influences the sensemaking process of SC can enrich understanding of the sensemaking process of SC and influential factors in more detail. This supports purposefully shaping brand communication in terms of sustainability.

Involving the consumers' media consumption in the examination can provide valuable findings on if/how sensemaking processes and authenticity perceptions of SC vary between different media channels. The sensemaking process of SC through different media channels might be especially interesting to study as different channels provide different levels of interactive possibilities. While social media offers a huge potential to interact with users, the interaction level with TV is quite low.

To enable communication professionals to manage SC strategically in terms of target-group and market-specific measures, future research should include the consumers' background knowledge and nationality as a critical factor for SC (in)authenticity perceptions. These findings would be especially interesting for a global brand such as NIVEA that is active in various consumer segments in diverse markets.

Lastly, a similar case study can be applied to startups/smaller companies to evaluate which aspects are valued or criticized by consumers making sense of its SC and to what extent (in)authenticity perceptions exist when it is not about a bigger company with a long tradition. Insights could provide valuable practical implications for communication professionals of both smaller and bigger companies.

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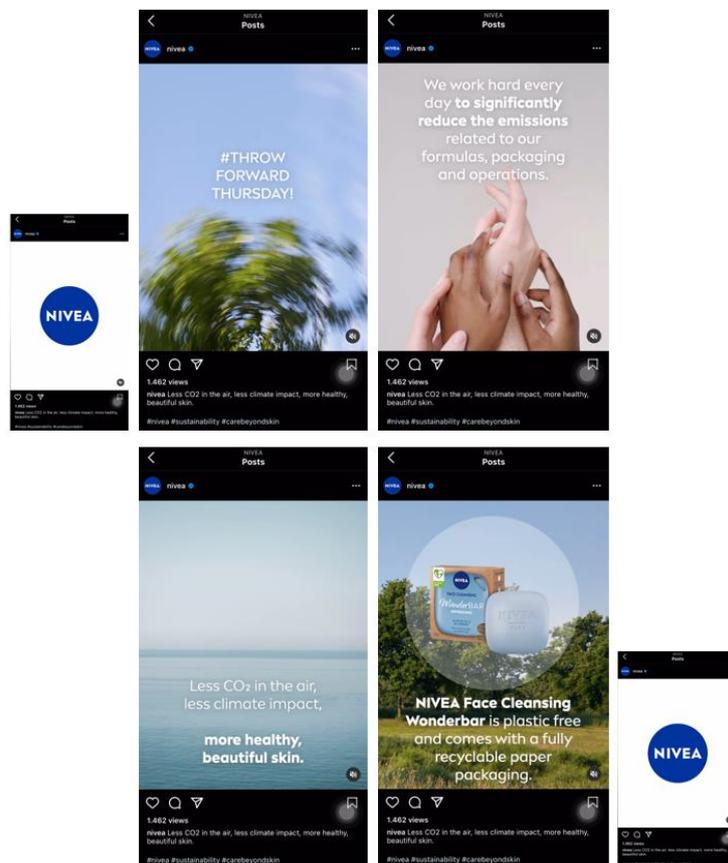
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485>

Appendix 1

Exemplary Sustainability Communication by NIVEA on Instagram

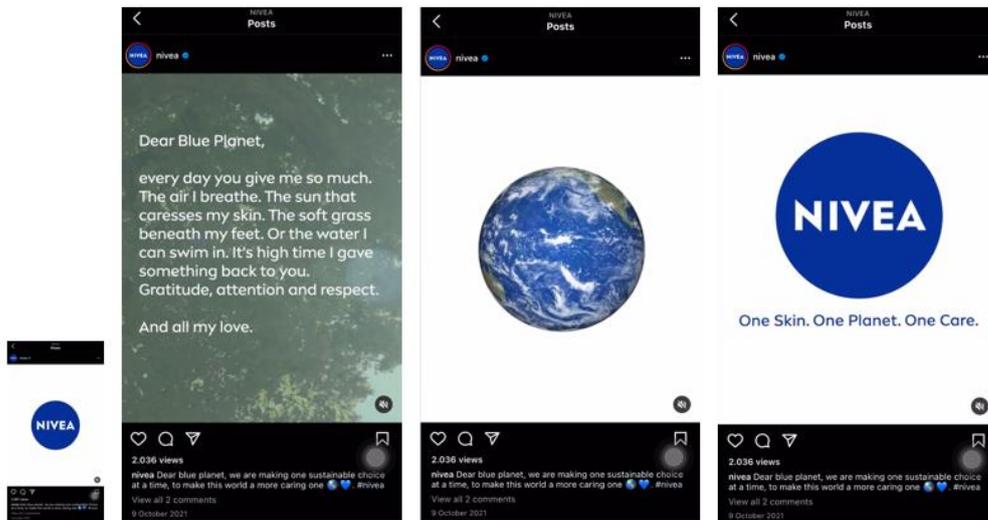
Originally, the exemplary Instagram posts are slideshows with underlying music.

*Focus on Facts*¹²

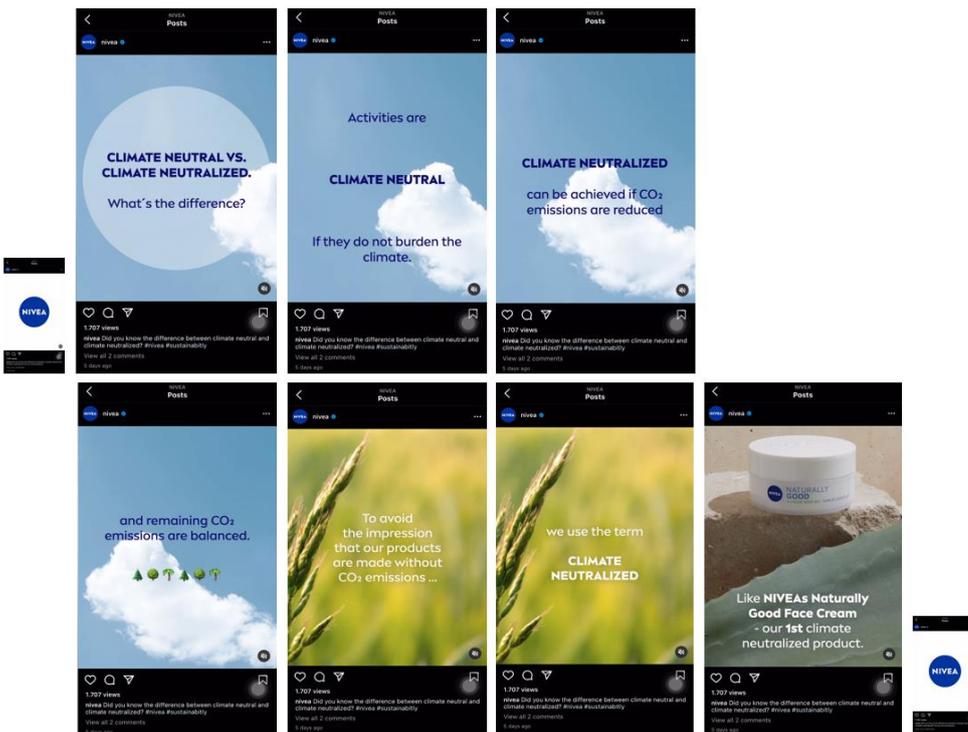


¹² NIVEA [@nivea]. (2022a, January 27), *Less CO₂ in the air, less climate impact, more healthy, beautiful skin* [Reel]. Instagram. Retrieved February 09, 2022 from https://www.instagram.com/p/CZOTf9XM_OK/

Focus on Emotions¹³



Focus on Education¹⁴



¹³ NIVEA [@nivea]. (2021, October 09), *Dear blue planet* [Reel]. Instagram. Retrieved February 09, 2022 from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CUy9MDGraBe/>

¹⁴ NIVEA [@nivea]. (2022b, February 04), *Did you know the difference between climate-neutral and climate-neutralized?* [Reel] Instagram. Retrieved February 09, 2022 from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZi53SutQwa/>

Appendix 2

2.1 Participant recruiting

Participation request

Hi! I am contacting you because you follow the official NIVEA IG account, assuming you know the brand and have already bought a few NIVEA products. I am currently writing my Master Thesis in Strategic Communication at Lund University in Sweden and need your support: Are you willing to participate in an online discussion with some others about NIVEA and its sustainability efforts? No worries, you must not have prior knowledge! You just have to be at least 18 years old and live in a European country.

I would be very thankful for your support and will raffle 2 x 25 euro among all participants (will be adjusted to other currencies). You can choose between the following three dates:

- Sat, February 26th, 11 am - 12.30 (CET)
- Thu, March 10th, 7 pm - 8.30 (CET)
- Sun, March 13th, 11 am - 12.30 (CET)

Please let me know if you are willing to participate and which date fits best for you. A Zoom invitation link and more information will follow in time. If you have questions about my research project, feel free to ask!

First Reminder

Dear supporter of my Master's thesis, this is a reminder that the group discussion will take place in 5 days on the *Date, Time*. You can join via the Zoom link below. I am looking forward to our talk! (*add invitation text from Zoom*)

Second Reminder

Hi! This is a reminder that the group discussion as part of my master thesis will take place in 1 day on the *Date, Time*. Please join via the Zoom link below. Many thanks again for your participation! See you tomorrow! (*add invitation text from Zoom*)

2.2 Participant details

Focus Group	Participant (Pseudonym)	Age	Nationality	Gender
A	Participant A1	22	Portuguese	female
A	Participant A2	28	Danish	female
A	Participant A3	26	German	female
A	Participant A4	24	German	female
A	Participant A5	22	Swiss	male
A	Participant A6	27	French	female
A	Participant A7	24	German	female
B	Participant B1	26	Dutch	female
B	Participant B2	22	German	female
B	Participant B3	29	German	female
B	Participant B4	31	German	female
B	Participant B5	22	Spanish	female
B	Participant B6	28	German	female
C	Participant C1	26	German	male
C	Participant C2	33	Danish	male
C	Participant C3	27	Austrian	female
C	Participant C4	28	Austrian	male
C	Participant C5	25	Dutch	female
C	Participant C6	30	German	female

Appendix 3

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent

This form explains the study's purpose, procedure, benefits, and data handling. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form.

Research Purpose

This research is conducted by Lisa Winneburg as part of her thesis project in the master's study Strategic Communication at Lund University. The study aims to learn more about how consumers perceive NIVEA's sustainability communication. You will be informed about the full research purpose at the end of the discussion in order to avoid any bias. Please notice that this research project is not conducted in cooperation with the NIVEA brand (or its parent company Beiersdorf AG), but it is the matter of an independent researcher.

Research Method

The research will be conducted in the form of semi-structured discussions among consumers (6 - 10 per focus group) that will last approximately 90 minutes. If you agree to take part, you will be asked to discuss a series of questions about sustainability in the skincare sector and your impressions of sustainability communication by NIVEA. Please do not worry or feel unprepared in case you are not familiar with NIVEA's sustainability communication. Examples will guide the discussion and it is mainly about your perceptions, feeling, and opinion.

To receive a zoom link and reminder, please provide your mail address: _____

Benefit

By participating, you will support a master thesis project and contribute to enhanced knowledge that could guide communication professionals in how to shape sustainability communication. Besides, the researcher will raffle 2 x 25 euros among participants (with adjustments to other currencies, if necessary).

Confidentiality & Anonymity

If you decide to participate, your identity as a participant in this study, and any other personal information gathered about you during the study, will be kept strictly confidential and will never be made public. The published results of the study will contain only data from which no individual participant can be identified. Your answers will be reported together with data from other research participants (approx. 30 in total) and pseudonyms will be used instead of your original name. By participating, you also accept to keep the conversation confidential and to not discuss the identity or comments of other participants afterward.

Voluntary participation

You are being asked to make a voluntary decision whether or not to participate in this study. If there is any part of the information that is not clear, please feel free to ask for clarifications. If you decide not to participate, or if you later decide to discontinue your participation, your decision will not affect your present or future relations with the researchers of Lund University. You will always be free to discontinue participation at any time.

The following data is needed as demographical background information of participants. Your data will be handled confidential, using pseudonyms, and will be only reported together with the data of all other participants.

_____ Age

_____ Nationality

_____ Gender

I will raffle two times 25 euros (with adjustments to other currencies) to participants. Please tick whether you want to take part in the lottery:

- I want to take part in the lottery.
 I do not want to take part in the lottery.

Statement

By signing this form, I am agreeing to voluntarily participate in the focus group. I have had a chance to read this consent form and I understood the information regarding participation in this research project to my satisfaction. I understand that I can leave the discussion at any time. Also, I confirm that I know the brand NIVEA for at least 6 months and have bought a NIVEA product at least once.

_____ Signature of Participant

_____ Date

_____ Print Name

_____ Pseudonym (filled out by researcher)

_____ Signature of Researcher

_____ Date

Appendix 4

Interview Guide

1. Initial briefing			
<p><i>Definition of situation and purpose:</i></p> <p>As you already know, I am researching how consumers of NIVEA perceive the brand's sustainability communication. This research is conducted as part of my thesis project in the master's study Strategic Communication at Lund University. I want to highlight here, that the study is conducted without cooperation with NIVEA but I am an independent researcher.</p> <p>As more and more brands and organizations engage in sustainability issues nowadays, I am interested in your perception of NIVEA's sustainability efforts. You have been selected because all of you are NIVEA consumers and to a certain extent familiar with the brand. So, I am here to learn from you and your experience, but don't worry if you're not familiar with sustainability communication, because I'll show examples during our discussion.</p> <p>Please be aware of that there are no wrong or right answers, but rather differing points of view. So please feel free to share your opinions even if it differs from what others have said. I am as interested in negative comments as positive comments, because both are helpful for the research's purpose.</p> <p>Also, I want to inform you that our conversation will be video-recorded only for myself. No third party will have access to the recordings.</p> <p>We will have one and a half hour for the discussion. Do you have any questions beforehand?</p>			
2. Question guide			
<i>Warm-Up</i>	To break the ice, I ask every one of you to say what comes into your mind when thinking of the brand NIVEA (word, characteristic, <u>value</u>). (<i>What values do you associate with the brand? > togetherness, care, humanity, naturalness, confidence, sympathy, harmony, honesty, security, reliability, trust, safety, protection</i>)		
<i>Overall RQ</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>	<i>Interview questions</i>	<i>Clarification & Follow-up question</i>
How do consumers make sense of NIVEA's sustainability communication based on brand authenticity perceptions?	[SC Awareness]: What sustainability communication initiatives of NIVEA are consumers aware of?	A. As we will talk about sustainability comm., I firstly want to create a common basis: How would you describe sustainability? What does sustainability mean for you? *	- What is your opinion on sustainability in the skin care sector? - To what extent do you think that skin care companies should communicate about their sustainability efforts?
		B. Can you think of concrete ads of NIVEA communicating about sustainability? (showing examples and let participants comment first impressions in zoom chat) Fact Example Emotions Example Education Example	If yes: - Why do you link that ad to sustainability? - (Why) do you think Nivea should communicate about sustainability? After having shown examples: - How do you understand this message? - Would you have expected such content/efforts from NIVEA or is it surprising for you? (<i>uncertainty?</i>) - Do you feel like the post/content fits to NIVEA and the brand's values/ associations that you mentioned at the beginning? (<i>brand's faithfulness towards itself; Morhart et al.'s (2015) continuity dimension</i>)

<i>Overall RQ</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>	<i>Interview questions</i>	<i>Clarification & Follow-up question</i>
How do consumers make sense of NIVEA's sustainability communication based on brand authenticity perceptions?	[Attitude]: How do consumers perceive NIVEA's sustainability communication in terms of brand authenticity?	C. Based on the examples, what do you think are NIVEA's intentions when engaging in sustainability issues?	- Are you of the opinion that NIVEA is really interested in making the future more sustainable/ making a real impact or is it rather going with the trend? (<i>intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation: passion, sincerity vs. profit, status; Morhart et al. 's (2015) integrity dimension</i>) - What makes you feel like that?
		D. To what extent do you consider the examples that I have shown as genuine (<i>honest/ sincere/ authentic</i>) and why?	- How do the examples differ for you? Is one of the examples more genuine (authentic) than another for you? (<i>objective verifiable facts vs. subjective impressions</i>) - Do you think that NIVEA is able to fulfill its promises? (<i>Portal et al. 's (2019) competence, Grunig's and Hon's (1999) trust dimension</i>) - To what extent do you feel like you can trust the brand? - To what extent do you believe NIVEA's sustainability communication? (<i>dependability; trust dimension; Morhart et al. 's (2015) credibility dimension</i>)
	[BA Understanding]: What does brand authenticity mean for consumers?	E. To what extent do you consider the brand NIVEA as genuine (<i>honest, sincere, authentic</i>) and why?	- I recall that some of you mentioned something a little different earlier. - Can you specify on that? - So, do you think that the brand is authentic?
3. Debriefing			
Time is up now. Finally, I would like to ask each of you to give a short summary statement on what you take away for yourselves from this interview.			
<p>Thank you all for participating in this discussion and bringing up many interesting, valuable aspects. At the beginning, I told you that I was interested in your perception of sustainability communication. For reasons of not being biased, I did not tell you that I was also interested in to what extent you perceive it as authentic.</p> <p>I want to reassure you that the data of this interview is completely confidential and will only be used for the purpose of this study.</p> <p>Thank you again! I will now stay on for a few minutes in case you have questions or remarks. Otherwise you are free to leave the meeting.</p>			

*Share academic definition of sustainability communication in case understandings of participant's differ from understanding used in study: *Corporate sustainability means "working towards a balance of economic, social, and environmental goals and values." (Signitzer & Prexl, 2007). In the context of this study, sustainability focuses on the environmental aspect and sustainability communication thus means informing stakeholders about these environmental sustainability efforts and how sustainability is integrated into corporate strategy.*

Appendix 5

Coding Frame

Categories	Sub-categories	Codes	Description (if necessary)
First associations with the brand	Factual associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • color • NIVEA creme • skincare routine 	
	Emotional associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family (members) • familiarity • tradition • quality • care • childhood • diversity • beach 	
Prior awareness of NIVEA's SC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ignorance of SC • uncertainty about awareness 		
	Prior awareness on brand level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • care-message known • sustainability logo 	
	Prior awareness on product level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • products known • ingredients known • packaging known • initiatives known 	
Perceived motives <i>(based on Cinelli and LeBoeuf (2020) and Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension of integrity)</i>	Intrinsic Motives <i>(warmth based on Portal et al. (2019))</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responsibility • making the world better • role model • scientific interest 	<i>Intrinsic motives describe perceiving good intentions of the brand</i>
	Extrinsic Motives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • profit • SC is a must • going with the trend • pressure (consumers, legal requirements, competitors) • reach younger generation • maintain consumers • perception of laggard • "greenwashing" (<i>precisely mentioned</i>) • image 	<i>Extrinsic motives describe perceiving behavior driven by external pressure and monetary or reputational reward.</i>
NIVEA Brand Level <i>(Outcome)</i>	Positive perceptions on NIVEA brand level <i>(authentic)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ubiquity of brand • perceived honesty • brand trust • competence (<i>Portal et al., 2019</i>) • tradition • perceived brand authenticity 	

	Negative perceptions on NIVEA brand level <i>(inauthentic)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • incompetence (<i>as lacking ability to make good intentions come true based on Portal et al.'s (2019) competence</i>) • lacking individuality/positioning • mistrust in the brand • mistrust in SC 	
Product Level <i>(Outcome)</i>	Positive perceptions on product level <i>(authentic)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • trust in product • trust in sustainability of product • good experience • versatility of the products • constancy of the products • product quality 	
	Negative perceptions on product level <i>(inauthentic)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • marketing strategy/ad • criticism of ingredients • mistrust in products 	
Indexical cues from SC <i>(Antecedent)</i> <i>(based on Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension of credibility)</i>	honest (true to fact) <i>(authentic)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • product in SC • ingredients • donations • action • appreciation of scientific elements • appreciation of educative approach • appreciation of facts • appreciation of emotional aspect • environment in the focus 	<i>Indexical cues refer to objective, verifiable information as evidence about what a brand claims to be.</i>
	dishonest (not true to fact) <i>(inauthentic)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • manipulative • buzzwords • lacking facts/information • factchecking necessary • lacking action • confusion about information 	
Iconic cues from SC <i>(Antecedent)</i> <i>(based on Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension of continuity as brand's faithfulness towards it-self)</i>	Perceived continuity (true to ideal) <i>(authentic)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • heritage • brand values • perceptions of no bad press/no scandal • color/circle (CI) • care value • purity/simplicity 	<i>Iconic cues refer to marketing and promotional cues, such as a brand's advertising or design features, that create impressions about the brand's essence.</i>
	Perceived discontinuity (not true to ideal) <i>(inauthentic)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lacking display of family • perception of rebranding • confusion about link to NIVEA • not part of brand's core • dislike of too much emotion 	
Existential cues from SC <i>(Antecedent)</i> <i>(based on Morhart et al.'s (2015) dimension of symbolism)</i>	true to self <i>(authentic)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • family (members) • childhood • familiarity • sympathy for brand • vulnerability (as admitting challenges/weaknesses) • enjoying calm feeling 	<i>Existential cues refer to the relationship between a brand and the individual consumer.</i>
	not true to self <i>(inauthentic)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • alternative products • misfit to own knowledge 	

Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supply chain • tradition as challenge • change is costly • approvals • journey • poorer product perception • challenge for bigger companies • scientific terms as buzzwords • address diverse consumers 	
Potentials for improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduce product range • set focus • clearer positioning • change in production • talk about achievements • improve packaging • improve general awareness 	
Development <i>(retrospective characteristic of sensemaking based on Weick (1995))</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • critical future outlook • raised awareness • more critical attitude • questioned trust • changed brand image • same brand image • same purchase behavior 	