

Consumer perceptions of brand authenticity: a review of purpose-washing phenomena in branding

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Abstract

In recent years, brands have increasingly adopted value-driven marketing strategies by aligning themselves with social causes such as environmental sustainability, gender equality, and other human rights issues. However, many brands have been criticised for engaging in purpose-washing, superficially promoting social values without genuine commitment, threatening consumer trust and perceptions of brand authenticity. This study explores how purpose-washing practices—including greenwashing, femwashing, rainbowwashing, and wokewashing—shape consumer perceptions of brand authenticity. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this research synthesises findings from articles published between 2020 and 2025. The review identifies key antecedents of authenticity perception, such as message clarity, cause–brand fit, communication strategies, psychological connection, and perceived sincerity. It also maps the theoretical frameworks used such as Attribution Theory, Congruence Theory, and Construal Level Theory and highlights the psychological and behavioural outcomes associated with perceived authenticity, ranging from positive attitudes and loyalty to skepticism, backlash, and brand avoidance. The results indicate that brand authenticity is crucial in influencing how consumers react to value-driven campaigns, and that any misalignment between a brand’s messaging and its actual practices tends to provoke perceptions of hypocrisy. This study concludes that authentic communication and ethical consistency are essential for maintaining trust in brand activism. The research offers practical implications for marketers, emphasising the importance of transparency and long-term alignment with social values. It also provides a foundation for future empirical studies examining the complex relationship between authenticity, ethics, and consumer behaviour in branding.

Keywords: brand authenticity; consumer perception; ethical branding; purpose-washing; systematic literature review.

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Introduction

In today's era, modern consumers are more aware than ever of the ethical, social, and environmental standards upheld by brands. Brand authenticity has become crucial in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase decisions (Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). The authenticity of a brand is no longer solely evaluated based on product quality, but also on the extent to which the brand consistently demonstrates its proclaimed values (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019). This phenomenon has pushed brands to show concern for social issues through campaigns promoting diversity, environmental sustainability, and women's empowerment.

However, there has been a growing trend of marketing practices that superficially project social values without genuine commitment called purpose-washing, which includes greenwashing, femwashing, rainbow washing, and other forms (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Purpose-washing refers to the gap between what brands claim and what they actually practice (Vredenburg et al., 2020). For instance, greenwashing involves overstating environmental initiatives (Szabo & Webster, 2021), while femwashing occurs when brands exploit feminist narratives without improving women's welfare in their operations (Hainneville et al., 2023). Similarly, rainbow-washing describes the use of LGBTQ+ symbols or campaigns without substantive support for LGBTQ+ communities (Gutierrez et al., 2022). These practices may damage consumer perceptions of brand authenticity and foster distrust (Schmuck et al., 2018). Therefore, understanding the relationship between purpose-washing and brand authenticity perception is crucial within the context of modern consumer behaviour.

Globally, major brands face increasing public pressure to appear ethical and socially responsible (White et al., 2019). At the same time, they are expected to achieve competitive business goals. This dual demand often tempts companies to engage in superficial social campaigns driven primarily by image-driven motives (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Such tendencies raise ethical concerns, primarily when a gap exists between the messages communicated and the company's internal practices. Numerous scandals such as H&M's sustainability campaigns amidst accusations of labour exploitation (BHRRC, 2023), or cosmetic brands promoting women's empowerment while being implicated in human rights violations highlight how purpose-washing can significantly harm brand reputation and consumer trust (de Jong et al., 2020). These cases emphasise the significance of exploring consumer perceptions of brand authenticity given its increasing attention in both academic and practical contexts.

Brand authenticity has gained popularity over the past decade, as reflected by the growing number of scholarly publications addressing the topic (Alchin et al., 2024; Arli et al., 2019). At the same time, terms such as greenwashing, rainbow-washing, and femwashing have also seen a notable rise in academic literature and public discourse (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wulf et al., 2022).

Consumers' heightened awareness of brand value authenticity has prompted researchers to examine the intersection of brand authenticity and ethical communication practices (Audrezet et al., 2020).

Bibliometric trend analyses reveal a surge in articles discussing this issue, particularly in marketing, consumer behaviour, and corporate communication (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Gomez-Borquez et al., 2024). This indicates the growing academic urgency and relevance of the topic. While many studies have addressed brand authenticity in general, there remains a gap in exploring how purpose-washing practices influence perceptions of brand authenticity explicitly (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Most research still treats authenticity and washing practices as separate domains, without providing an integrated analysis. Furthermore, most existing studies are theoretical or conceptual, with only a few offering a systematic mapping of trends, developmental directions, and thematic focuses in related literature. Thus, this study systematically integrates consumer perceptions of brand authenticity within the context of purpose-washing.

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to synthesise 33 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025. The main objective of this research is to examine how purpose-washing tactics including greenwashing, wokewashing, rainbow-washing, and others shape and influence consumer perceptions of brand authenticity. This study aims to systematically examine relevant literature in marketing and consumer behaviour. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) identify publication trends, thematic focuses, and dominant theoretical frameworks in the related body of research; and (2) uncover various consumer attitudes and behavioural outcomes that emerge in response to perceptions of brand authenticity in the context of purpose-washing. Accordingly, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive mapping of the topic's development and open pathways for deeper, more focused future research.

This research contributes both academically and practically. From an academic perspective, it systematically maps the dynamics between brand authenticity perceptions and purpose-washing practices in consumer behaviour. This study uses the SLR approach to build a more integrative conceptual framework. From a practical standpoint, the findings assist marketers, brand strategists, and communication practitioners understand the impact of authentic social campaign strategies on consumer perception. As such, this study bridges academic gaps and offers relevant insights for making more ethical and sustainable business decisions.

Literature review

Brand authenticity

The idea of brand authenticity is increasingly prominent in marketing studies, especially in relation to how brands communicate around social topics or

value-driven messages. Brand authenticity is commonly understood as the degree to which consumers perceive a brand as genuine, trustworthy, and true to its stated identity (Akbar & Wymer, 2017). It encompasses two core dimensions: originality (uniqueness and non-imitation) and sincerity (truthfulness and honesty in messaging) (Morhart et al., 2015). In marketing contexts, authenticity can be viewed through objective and subjective approaches: objective authenticity relies on tangible evidence, while subjective authenticity reflects consumer perceptions and evaluations, which often dominate branding research (Kang & Ro, 2024).

Previous studies highlight the critical role of perceived brand authenticity in shaping the effectiveness of campaigns centred on social issues or activism, including femvertising and brand activism. In such cases, authenticity depends on message-value alignment, clear motivations, and demonstrated sacrifices (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Without these elements, consumers may perceive brand behaviour as opportunistic, leading to declining trust. Furthermore, brand authenticity is vital in communicating empowerment messages, such as femvertising. Advertisements that convey authenticity foster favourable attitudes toward the brand (Becker et al., 2019; Sterbenk et al., 2022).

Additionally, perceived authenticity is important for building emotional connections with consumers and enhancing advertising effectiveness (Papadopoulou et al., 2024). When consumers experience authenticity in their interactions with a brand, they tend to feel more trusting, emotionally connected, and ultimately provide more favourable evaluations of the brand (Napoli et al., 2014). Yet most studies conceptualise authenticity broadly, without examining how it is challenged in purpose-washing practices, such as femwashing or greenwashing. Addressing this gap, the present study systematically reviews how consumer perceptions of authenticity operate within purpose-washing contexts, with a focus on its antecedents and outcomes. In doing so, it contributes to both authenticity theory and the emerging literature on purpose-washing by clarifying underexplored intersections between the two.

Research method

Research approach

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as its primary research method. SLR has become an increasingly popular methodology in contemporary research due to its ability to effectively facilitate locating, evaluating, and interpreting key literature within a specific field of study (Faisal Abrar et al., 2020). This method is considered crucial for broadening and deepening the understanding of a research area, offering a more systematic and comprehensive analytical context (Sauer & Seuring, 2023). Unlike traditional narrative reviews, SLR is designed to minimise bias through transparent and structured procedures at every research stage, from problem formulation, sampling, and data collection to reporting results (Christofi et al., 2017).

The primary data sources for this study are journal articles retrieved from reputable databases, including Google Scholar, Emerald, Sage, Taylor & Francis, ScienceDirect, and Springer. These databases were selected for their multidisciplinary coverage and ability to provide peer-reviewed, credible articles in business, management, and consumer psychology.

The initial search process yielded 484 articles using the following Boolean search query: ("brand authenticity" OR "perceived authenticity" OR "brand inauthenticity") AND ("greenwashing" OR "pinkwashing" OR "bluwashing" OR "femwashing" OR "wokewashing" OR "social washing" OR "purpose washing" OR "ethics washing" OR "rainbow washing" OR "diversity washing" OR "CSR-washing").

Subsequently, a screening process was conducted based on several criteria: relevance to business, management, and accounting; English-language articles; and publication type limited to peer-reviewed journal articles. Non-academic publications such as review articles, meeting abstracts, early access publications, editorials, conference proceedings, book reviews, corrections, data papers, and book chapters were excluded. The articles were also restricted to the publication period between 2020 and 2025 to ensure the currency of the reviewed literature, representing the last five years.

This stage resulted in 343 journal articles, which were then subjected to an eligibility screening process to select those most relevant to the study. Articles that did not focus on consumer behaviour or were not quantitative studies were excluded. This focus on quantitative research was chosen to ensure consistency and comparability across findings, as consumer behaviour in this domain is predominantly examined through quantitative methods. After this layered selection process, a final set of 33 open-access articles that met the inclusion criteria was obtained.

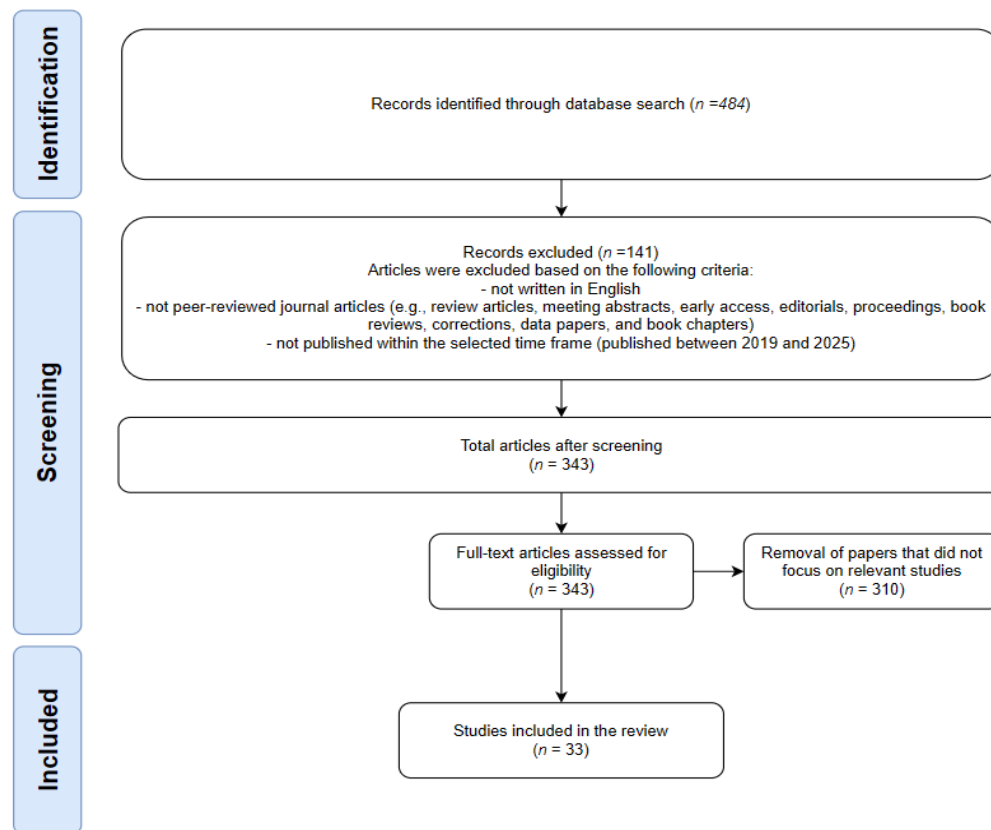
This approach enables a comprehensive thematic mapping and provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding the dynamics of brand authenticity within the context of purpose-washing. By systematically reviewing the selected articles, this study aims to construct a comprehensive framework for understanding consumer perceptions of ethical and unethical branding practices. Figure 1 shows the research framework of this study.

Data collection

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as its primary research method. SLR has become an increasingly popular methodology. Data collection in this study was carried out through identifying and extracting academic journal articles discussing brand authenticity within the context of purpose-washing, with a primary focus on Google Scholar and limited to publications between 2020 and 2025. Google Scholar was selected due to its wide coverage and accessibility, allowing researchers to retrieve academic literature

from a range of reputable sources, including peer-reviewed journals in the fields of business, management, and psychology. This platform facilitates comprehensive access to relevant literature and supports the validity and relevance of the sources used in the research.

Figure 1.
Research framework



Source: Author's work (2025)

The information collected from these articles includes publication year, citation count, and the most frequently cited authors. This information helps map the development of the topic over time and identify trends and dominant thoughts in brand authenticity and purpose-washing practices.

To support the bibliometric analysis, this study employs two main tools: VOSviewer and Mendeley. VOSviewer is used to analyse and visualise the co-occurrence relationships among keywords, enabling the identification of dominant themes and conceptual networks within the reviewed literature. Meanwhile, Mendeley organises and manages the analysed journal articles and assists with citation and source documentation. Combining these tools strengthens the validity of the analysis results, facilitates traceability of the data selection process, and enhances the transparency of the study's findings. Thus, the data obtained can be presented systematically, sustainably, and replicably for similar future studies.

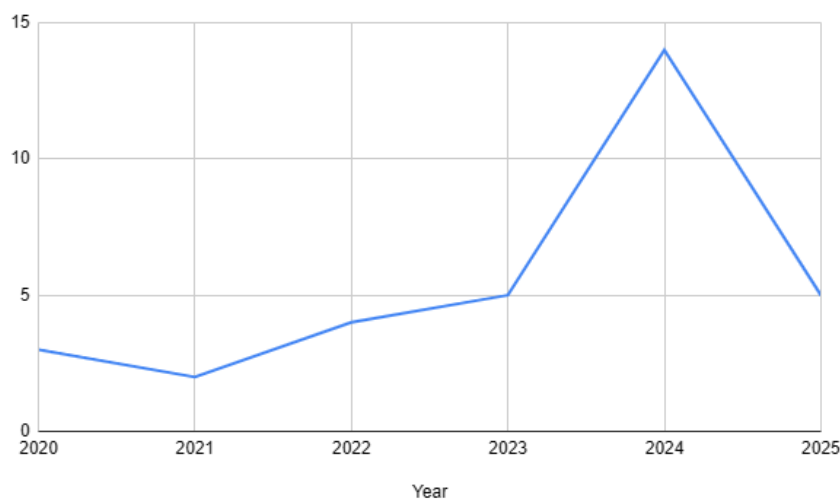
Results

Research trends

Based on the analysis of publication distribution from 2020 to 2025, the research trend concerning how consumers perceive brand authenticity when examined through the lens of purpose-washing shows significant growth, particularly in the last two years. As shown in Figure 2, the number of publications was relatively low at the beginning, with only three articles in 2020, followed by a slight decline to 2 articles in 2021. However, starting in 2022, the trend began to rise with four articles, increasing to 5 in 2023. However, starting in 2022, the trend began to rise with four articles, increasing to 5 in 2023.

Figure 2.

Research trends of purpose-washing



Source: Author's work (2025)

The peak of productivity occurred in 2024, with 14 published articles. This surge indicates growing academic attention toward the issue of purpose-washing (such as greenwashing, femwashing, and wokewashing) concerning consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity. Several factors may have contributed to this increase: rising consumer demand for authentic brand values, growing digital literacy that enables consumers to critically assess socially driven branding strategies, and global social dynamics that increasingly highlight issues such as sustainability, gender equality, and social justice.

However, 2025 shows a notable decline with only five articles, although this figure may not fully represent the entire year due to the likelihood that many articles are still in the publication pipeline. Therefore, this decline should not be interpreted as a decrease in academic interest, but rather as a limitation of data collection up to mid-2025.

Overall, this publication trend reflects the evolving academic attention toward the relationship between brand authenticity and purpose-washing

phenomena, and highlights the importance of this topic in addressing consumer trust challenges in the era of value-driven marketing.

Subject areas

This review systematically analyses existing research on how purpose-washing, where brands use social causes superficially or inconsistently to drive profit, shapes consumer perceptions of brand authenticity. The review of academic articles reveals that this topic is interdisciplinary and is featured in various prominent journals focusing on business ethics, sustainability, advertising, and consumer behaviour.

The journals that consistently publish relevant articles include the Journal of Business Ethics and Sustainability, each contributing four articles. Journal of Business Ethics stands out in terms of academic impact, with the article by [Sterbenk et al. \(2022\)](#) receiving 210 citations, followed by [Ioannou et al. \(2023\)](#) with 165 citations. This indicates that ethical aspects of branding and consumer perceptions of brand authenticity are receiving substantial attention in business ethics.

Meanwhile, sustainability contributes to the sustainability dimension of purpose-washing, although the citation count is relatively lower, suggesting that research in this area is still emerging. Journal of Business Research, with three articles, examines the topic from the perspective of consumer behaviour and brand strategy, with [Glozer & Morsing \(2020\)](#) being a key reference connecting corporate social responsibility with consumer perceptions.

Other journals, such as the International Journal of Advertising, Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising, and Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, also contribute to understanding how brand messages are perceived, particularly when social values are incorporated into marketing campaigns. This highlights the strong connection between marketing communication, authenticity perception, and the potential for consumer skepticism toward inconsistent brand purposes.

Thus, this study area intersects corporate ethics, marketing communication, and consumer behaviour in assessing the authenticity of brands claiming social purposes. This multidisciplinary approach is essential to understand how authenticity perceptions are formed and how consumers respond to purpose-washing practices in an era of increasingly value-laden branding. Table 1 shows the distribution of journals and their citation number.

Theoretical frameworks

Research on consumer perceptions of brand authenticity within the scope of purpose-washing draws on diverse theories from social psychology, consumer behaviour, and strategic communication to explain how brand messaging shapes consumer perceptions and subsequent behavioural responses. An analysis of 33

articles reveals that the most commonly used theory is the Attribution Theory (Budi Riharjo et al., 2025; Hu et al., 2023; Keilmann & Koch, 2024; Lv et al., 2024). This theory is used to understand how consumers interpret the motives behind a brand's social claims and how those attributions affect perceptions of brand authenticity. The description of theoretical frameworks is shown in Table 2.

Table 1.
Distribution of journals and their citation numbers

Institutions	Number of Papers	Number Cited
Journal of Business Ethics	4	210 (Sterbenk et al., 2022); 165 (Ioannou et al., 2023); 82 (Orazi & Chan, 2020); 5 (Lewin & Warren, 2024)
Sustainability	4	37 (Xiao et al., 2022); 3 (Hu et al., 2023); 1 (Fang, 2024); 0 (Effendy & Xiao, 2025)
Journal of Business Research	3	56 (Ahmad et al., 2024); 53 (Glozer & Morsing, 2020); 6 (Walter et al., 2024)
International Journal of Advertising	2	39 (Wulf et al., 2022); 1 (Caruelle, 2024)
International Journal of Hospitality Management	2	7 (Lv et al., 2024); 3 (Xue & Mattila, 2024)
Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising	2	95 (Pittman et al., 2022); 0 (Mueller-Bryson et al., 2025)
International Journal of Corporate Social Responsibility	1	54 (Smith & Rhiney, 2020)
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	1	37 (Sajid et al., 2024)

Source: Author's work (2025)

In the study by Budi Riharjo et al. (2025), Attribution Theory explores how consumers attribute corporate failures, particularly severe ones, to negative internal motives such as intentionality or negligence. These attributions subsequently strengthen perceived brand hypocrisy and diminish favourable attitudes toward the brand. Meanwhile, Hu et al. (2023) use the theory to categorise consumer perceptions of CSR initiatives based on the perceived motivation of the company, whether altruistic (socially driven) or egoistic (profit-driven). These attributions determine whether consumers view CSR as shared value, genuine citizenship, purpose-washing, or even hypocrisy, influencing their brand attitudes. Lv et al. (2024) and Keilmann & Koch (2024) further show that consistency between sustainability claims and external evidence (such as customer reviews) strongly influences consumers' attributions of brand motivation. When consistency is observed, consumers tend to attribute sincere internal motivation; conversely, discrepancies trigger manipulative external attributions, leading to negative perceptions of corporate morality and reduced purchase or booking intentions.

Congruence Theory is used across these studies to understand how alignment between brand values and consumer expectations or identities shapes

responses to value-driven branding strategies. [Namhyun \(2021\)](#) applies this theory to explain how alignment between brand values and consumers' values is an antecedent affecting attitudes toward femvertising, ultimately influencing brand attitudes, purchase intention, and e-WOM. Furthermore, [Negm \(2023\)](#) explores perceived congruence between femvertising messages and consumers' social values across genders, showing that congruence contributes to perceptions of authenticity and the effectiveness of empowerment campaigns. Meanwhile, [Olk \(2021\)](#) adopts Self-Congruence Theory in the green marketing context, showing that alignment between consumers' ideal self and a brand's green image enhances authenticity perceptions and reduces greenwashing perceptions, moderated by congruence with the actual self. Findings from these three studies highlight the importance of congruence, whether through shared social values or alignment with self-identity, in shaping consumer perceptions of brand authenticity and message effectiveness.

Construal Level Theory (CLT) also appears prominently in studies seeking to explain the effect of psychological distance on consumer evaluations of brand purpose, as seen in [Papadopoulou et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Ahmad et al. \(2024\)](#). These studies show that perceptions of brand authenticity can be influenced by how concrete or abstract the brand's social purpose communication appears. Meanwhile, Signaling Theory, applied by [Lewin & Warren \(2024\)](#) and [Kang & Ro \(2024\)](#), helps explain how brands send signals of honesty or hypocrisy through their messages and social actions.

Table 2.

Description of theoretical frameworks

Theory	Used in research
Attribution Theory	(Budi Riharjo et al., 2025); (Hu et al., 2023); (Lv et al., 2024); (Keilmann & Koch, 2024)
Congruence Theory	(Namhyun, 2021); (Negm, 2023); (Olk, 2021);
Construal Level Theory	(Papadopoulou et al., 2024); (Ahmad et al., 2024)
Signaling theory	(Lewin & Warren, 2024); (Kang & Ro, 2024)
SOR Theory	(Fang, 2024)
Attachment Theory	(Budi Riharjo et al., 2025)
Belief Congruence Theory	(Yoon et al., 2024)
Information Manipulation Theory	(Wang & Jung, 2025)
Institutional Theory	(Xiao et al., 2022)
Prosocial Behavior Theory	(Martínez-Aguirre et al., 2025)
Cognitive Dissonance Theory	(Olk, 2021)
Social Identity Theory	(Cheah et al., 2023)
Social Norms Theory	(Pittman et al., 2022 ; Sajid et al., 2024)
Theory of Planned Behavior	(Effendy & Xiao, 2025)

Source: Author's work (2025)

Other theories are used in more specific research focuses. For instance, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory was used by [Fang \(2024\)](#) to analyse the consumer response flow to brand social stimuli. Attachment Theory, Belief Congruence Theory, and Cognitive Dissonance Theory explain consumers'

emotional responses and internal conflicts when brands are perceived as inauthentic or inconsistent.

Additionally, Social Identity Theory and Social Norms Theory (Pittman et al., 2022; Sajid et al., 2024) provide frameworks for understanding how group identity and social norms shape consumer perceptions and actions in response to brand activism. Theory of Planned Behaviour and Prosocial Behaviour Theory also trace consumer intentions and behaviours toward brands that engage with social issues. Overall, the diversity of theoretical frameworks reflects the complexity of the purpose-washing phenomenon and the need for a multidisciplinary approach to understand the dynamics between value-driven branding strategies and consumer perceptions of brand authenticity.

Conceptual map

The analysis conducted using VOSviewer identified five clusters derived from the text data, which are visually represented by red, yellow, blue, orange, and green, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Purple cluster (focus on consumer response)

This cluster illustrates the relationship between femvertising, attitude, and authenticity. It shows that a considerable body of research focuses on the impact of femvertising campaigns on consumer responses and the perceived authenticity of brands communicating gender equality. Keywords such as brand hypocrisy and brand avoidance in this cluster suggest that consumer perceptions may turn negative if femvertising is inconsistent with the company's core values. This cluster is strongly connected to the red cluster (hypocrisy–CSR) through keywords like brand authenticity, brand trust, and action, highlighting how perceived authenticity is tied to corporate social responsibility. It also links to the yellow cluster (company–washing) through the keyword washing, implying the strategic role of gender representation in social marketing practices.

Red Cluster (Focus on Value–Practice Disconnection)

This cluster represents major brand hypocrisy and corporate social responsibility (CSR) themes. Keywords such as corporate hypocrisy, CSR information, and customer focus on the mismatch between the ethical image conveyed and the company's actual behaviour, particularly from the consumer's perspective. It directly connects to the purple cluster through brand authenticity and hypocrisy, indicating that consumers assess authenticity based on alignment between claimed values and real actions. This cluster also relates to the blue cluster (relationship–green purchase decision), suggesting that perceptions of CSR influence brand–consumer relationship quality and environmentally friendly purchase intentions.

Yellow cluster (focus on gender representation and feminist issues)

This cluster reflects the relationship between the entity company, the practice of washing (including femwashing), and values such as gender equality

and advertisement. It shows that companies often use gender equality narratives as part of their marketing strategy, but risk being accused of "value washing" if not supported by real practices. It connects with the purple cluster through femvertising and advertisement, showing the continuity between corporate communication strategies and consumer perceptions. It also links to the red cluster (hypocrisy), reinforcing that femwashing may lead to perceptions of hypocrisy if not followed by appropriate actions.

Blue cluster (focus on consumer intent and environmental image)

This cluster examines the interaction between companies and consumers, with a special emphasis on decisions driven by values, such as environmentally conscious purchases. The keyword imagery indicates the importance of symbols, visuals, and value communication in shaping perception. It intersects with the red cluster through CSR and corporate hypocrisy, suggesting that inconsistencies between image and reality can affect consumer loyalty and purchasing decisions.

Orange cluster (focus on female representation in specific industries)

This relatively small but distinct cluster features keywords such as woman, restaurant, and advertisement. It may reflect a more focused exploration of how women are represented in specific industries like F&B and how these representations influence brand perception. It connects to the yellow cluster (company–washing) and the purple cluster (femvertising) through the narrative of female representation in advertising, central to discussions on authenticity and marketing ethics.

Green Cluster (Focus on Brand Identity Validation)

This cluster emphasises the importance of consumer perceptions regarding brand authenticity, credibility, and trust. These elements are often used as mediating variables in studies examining the effects of CSR or femvertising on outcomes such as brand trust, brand avoidance, and purchase intention. Serving as a strong bridge between the purple cluster (attitude–authenticity) and the red cluster (CSR–hypocrisy), this cluster explains how perceived authenticity becomes a central reference point in evaluating the legitimacy of socially driven branding strategies.

Discussion

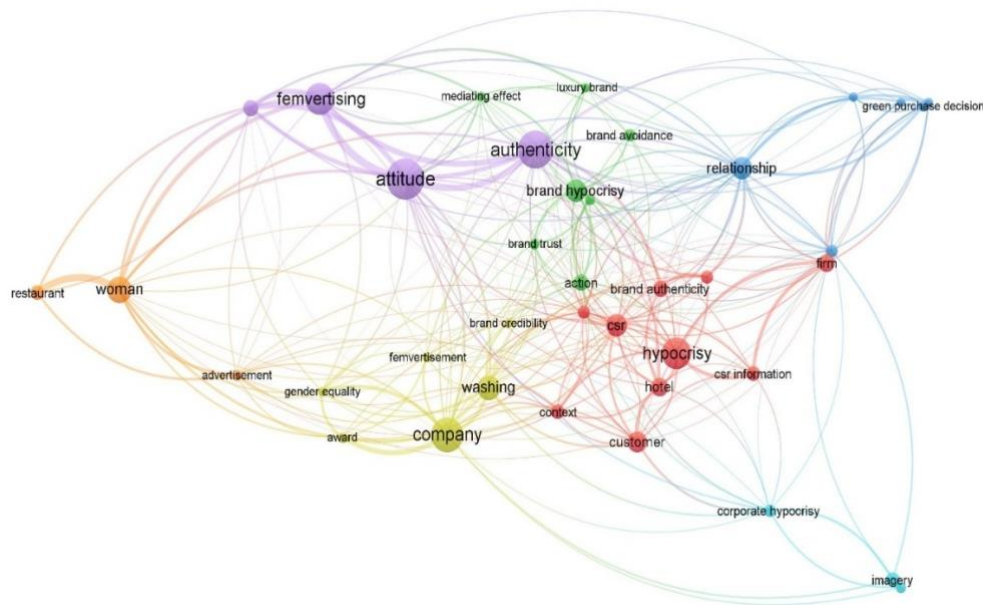
Definitions and scopes of purpose washing

Greenwashing

Greenwashing refers to marketing practices in which companies exaggerate or falsify their environmental sustainability claims to create an eco-friendly image that does not align with reality (Schmuck et al., 2018). It is a strategy whereby companies deliver inaccurate or deceptive environmental claims about their products or services to create the impression of environmental concern when they are not (Ioannou et al., 2023). In green advertising, ideally aiming to demonstrate a company's environmental responsibility and encourage sustainable lifestyles,

manipulative efforts often make consumers perceive the brand as inauthentic (Pittman et al., 2022). When environmental messages are seen as superficial or merely for image-building purposes, consumers become skeptical about product quality, trust in the brand decreases, and purchase intention is reduced (Matthes et al., 2014). This shows that inauthentic environmental communication strategies can confuse consumers and damage organisational credibility (Qayyum et al., 2023).

Figure 3.
Bibliometric map



Source: Author's work (2025)

Furthermore, greenwashing is often perceived as corporate hypocrisy, referring to the inconsistency between CSR policies and their implementation (Ioannou et al., 2023). Customers who detect such hypocrisy tend to respond dissatisfied, even without explicit scandals or violations. This occurs because consumers function not just as economic actors assessing practical value, but also as members of a social community who hold moral expectations of companies (Jones, 2019). When greenwashing harms a company's character reputation, the collective perception of its integrity and honesty, customer satisfaction decreases (B. Park & Rogan, 2019). Even a strong capability reputation (e.g., producing high-quality or innovative products) may not always mitigate the adverse effects of damaged character reputation, as high reputations can raise consumer expectations of corporate integrity (Ioannou et al., 2023). Therefore, greenwashing causes short-term losses through reduced customer satisfaction and risks eroding long-term trust in the brand and its sustainability commitments.

Femwashing

Femwashing refers to companies using women empowerment messages in their marketing communications, particularly through femvertising (feminist advertising), without being accompanied by genuine commitments to gender equality in their internal and external practices (Sterbenk et al., 2022). The term has emerged alongside the popularity of femvertising as a marketing strategy that associates products with feminist values and women's empowerment. Like greenwashing, femwashing is a form of CSR-washing, indicating a discrepancy between the brand's communicated image and its actual practices, particularly regarding gender equality issues (Sterbenk et al., 2022; Wagner et al., 2020). According to Hainneville et al. (2023), femwashing reflects consumers' perceived inauthenticity of femvertising campaigns that fail to meet key pillars of authenticity. Such campaigns are seen as fake activism, where women's empowerment messages are used superficially for commercial purposes without a sincere commitment to feminist values.

Some studies suggest that the success of femvertising often depends on consumers' perceptions of the message's authenticity and credibility. Martínez-Aguirre et al. (2025) found that consumers' feminist knowledge plays a key role in shaping their perception of femvertising. Consumers with higher feminist literacy are more capable of distinguishing between messages that genuinely support feminist values and those that are merely symbolic. The study also showed that perceived authenticity correlates with brand attitude, positive WOM engagement, and brand recommendation, thus encouraging brands to craft sincere and credible messages.

On the other hand, Papadopoulou et al. (2024) found that message framing in femvertising, especially transformational, can increase perceptions of authenticity, even for utilitarian products like sanitary pads. This research suggests that message framing can serve as an effective proxy for building authenticity, particularly when combined with certain levels of construal mindset. However, the study also emphasises that the effect of framing may work independently of perceived authenticity, indicating that framing and content play distinct strategic roles in shaping consumer behavioural intentions.

Despite many femvertising campaigns receiving praise and winning awards, Sterbenk et al. (2022) found that award-winning femvertising companies did not significantly differ from non-winning companies regarding female representation in leadership or the number of internal programs supporting women. This highlights the potential for fempower-washing, where companies project an image of supporting women's empowerment without structural commitments to gender equality. Consumers, especially women, are increasingly attentive to whether brand communications align with corporate practices and are willing to use social media to challenge brands when discrepancies are uncovered (Passifume, 2019).
Rainbow washing

In the context of purpose washing, rainbow washing refers to companies symbolically declaring support for the LGBTQIA* community with ambiguous motives, prioritising commercial gain over genuine social commitment (Lim et al., 2024; Wulf et al., 2022). This practice often appears during pride month, when brands launch rainbow-themed products or campaigns without internal policies that truly support diversity (Lim et al., 2024). This leads to skepticism, particularly from LGBTQIA* consumers who question the authenticity of such support.

As public expectations rise regarding corporate social justice stance, campaigns related to gender diversity or LGBTQIA* rights have become part of Corporate Social Responsibility strategies (Taylor, 2014; Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, if the messages conveyed do not align with actual practices, consumers may view the company as inauthentic or hypocritical (Wagner et al., 2020). Sensitivity to visual symbols like the rainbow flag does not guarantee positive perception, as these symbols may be seen as manipulative if not supported by real actions (Wulf et al., 2022).

To avoid accusations of rainbow washing, companies must show concrete commitments, such as implementing inclusive policies, partnering with LGBTQIA* organisations, and fostering safe work environments (Kang & Ro, 2024). Transparency through data and external evaluation systems, such as DAX30 diversity reports, is also important in building perceptions of authenticity (Parguel et al., 2015). Symbolic support alone can backfire without sustained and comprehensive efforts and damage brand image and trust.

Wokewashing

The concept of "woke" started as recognition of social injustice but is now commonly used pejoratively to refer to companies that superficially promote progressive ideals without consistent values or authentic practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Warren, 2022). This phenomenon is called woke washing, where companies declare support for social issues without showing genuine commitment. Vredenburg et al. (2020) distinguish between honest woke brands, active and authentic in their social actions, and those that engage in woke washing due to unfulfilled promises or a lack of involvement in the issues they claim to support.

The concept of woke washing includes discrepancies between a brand's public statements and its actions, whether through failing to fulfil promises (congruent woke washing) or contradicting their claimed commitments through unrelated criticisms (incongruent woke washing) (McCardle, 2022; Murphy, 2021). For example, GUCCI's unfulfilled promises to increase workplace diversity represent congruent woke washing, while Glossier's case of a racially toxic work culture, despite supporting racial justice movements, reflects incongruent woke washing. Both negatively affect perceptions of brand authenticity, though congruent woke washing is considered more damaging due to its clear violation of public expectations (Sinha & Lu, 2016).

Woke branding and woke advertising, companies use tools to communicate their progressive positions on social justice issues like gender and racial equality (Feng et al., 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022). However, like greenwashing or CSR-washing, woke advertising risks being perceived as inauthentic if not supported by consistent business practices (Schmidt et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, consumers increasingly demand clarity and authenticity in every social campaign brands launch, emphasising the need for genuine, sustained commitment, not just performative marketing narratives.

Antecedents of perceived brand authenticity in purpose-washing contexts

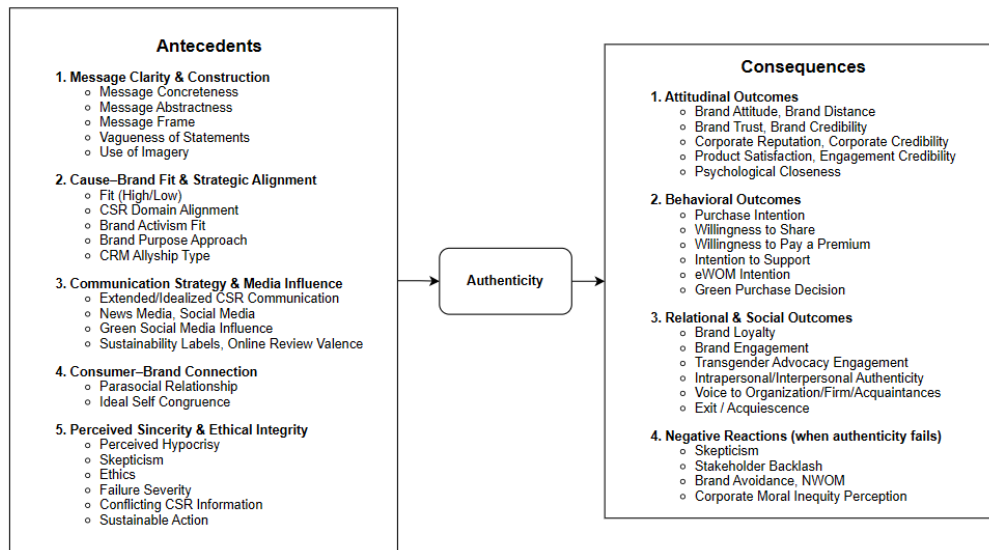
A systematic review of 33 articles revealed several factors serving as antecedents or key determinants of how consumers perceive brand authenticity in the context of purpose-washing. These factors shape how consumers assess whether a brand's social messaging is genuine or manipulative. Figure 4 shows antecedents and outcomes of authenticity. The findings are categorised into five main groups: (1) message clarity & construction, referring to how the social message is framed; (2) cause-brand fit & strategic alignment, highlighting the alignment between the social cause and the brand's identity; (3) communication strategy & media influence, covering communication channels and media influence; (4) consumer-brand connection, referring to the psychological closeness between the consumer and the brand; and (5) perceived sincerity & ethical integrity, which reflects consumers' judgment of the brand's moral sincerity.

Message clarity & construction

Message clarity and construction are crucial in shaping consumer perceptions of brand authenticity. Message concreteness, which refers to how specific and detailed a message is, has been shown to strengthen brand attitudes and consumer support for empowerment campaigns because specificity enhances credibility (M. Park et al., 2023). In contrast, abstract messages, as explained by Construal Level Theory, risk creating distance and skepticism; however, when brands highlight concrete internal changes, such as workplace policies or supply chain improvements, consumers perceive activism messages as more aligned with the issue, boosting authenticity (Ahmad et al., 2024). Framing also matters: evidence from femvertising in feminine hygiene products reveals that transformational frames emphasising empowerment drive stronger purchase behaviour than purely informational ones, particularly when perceived authenticity is high (Papadopoulou et al., 2024). By contrast, vague or rhetorical statements tend to weaken trust (Wulf et al., 2022), and visual elements can either reinforce or undermine brand authenticity depending on their alignment with claimed values.

Figure 4.

Antecedents and outcomes of authenticity



Source: Author's work (2025)

Cause–brand fit & strategic alignment

The alignment between the brand and the social issue it promotes (cause–brand fit) is a significant determinant of authenticity perception. Cause–brand fit denotes the alignment between a brand's core values and the social cause it chooses to support. Research shows that when there is high fit, consumers perceive the brand as sincere and authentic, while low fit can trigger doubt and accusations of femwashing, greenwashing, or other forms of purpose-washing (Mueller-Bryson et al., 2025; Xue & Mattila, 2024). Low “say–do” fit, in which brand communication contradicts its actual behaviour, often leads to perceived hypocrisy. A well-documented case is Novartis, which publicly supported women's empowerment initiatives while facing multiple lawsuits for gender discrimination (Mueller-Bryson et al., 2025). Such inconsistencies erode trust, credibility, and authenticity, which in turn affect brand attitudes. However, findings also suggest that among brands with low say–do fit, high cause–brand fit may act as a buffer because consumers view them as less hypocritical than brands with both low say–do fit and low cause–brand fit (Xue & Mattila, 2024).

The consistency between the CSR domain and brand identity is also important (Smith & Rhiney, 2020). CSR domain alignment refers to the degree to which a company's missteps occur in the same area as its CSR efforts, which can magnify perceptions of inauthenticity when inconsistencies appear. Brand activism fit further emphasises whether activism efforts appear strategically aligned with the brand's long-term identity, rather than opportunistic or reactive (Ahmad et al., 2024). In this regard, Walter et al. (2024) found that a value-driven approach to brand purpose is more convincing than one based merely on trends. Additionally, the type of partnership approach in cause-related marketing (CRM) shapes consumer perceptions: brands positioned as faithful allies that commit

resources and long-term support are perceived more authentically than opportunists who engage in visible signaling without costly or sustained action (Xue & Mattila, 2024). Collectively, these factors underscore that perceptions of authenticity are contingent upon the extent to which a brand's strategy demonstrates coherence, consistency, and rationality in advancing social issues.

Communication strategy & media influence

A brand's communication strategy and its media presence are key antecedents in shaping authenticity perceptions. Extended CSR communication, which provokes ambiguity and interpretative multiplicity, or idealised CSR communication, which encodes overly polished and aspirational claims, can create impressions of manipulation and overclaiming that trigger skepticism (Glozer & Morsing, 2020). When communication is stretched too far from verifiable facts, consumers interpret the message as ambiguous, which weakens credibility. Conversely, communication that is transparent and evidence-based helps maintain trust in brand authenticity. Mass media and social media also play critical roles in amplifying public opinion and shaping authenticity judgments (Hu et al., 2023; Pittman et al., 2022). Social media, in particular, offers an interactive, multimedia platform that facilitates dynamic exchanges both between brands and consumers and among consumers themselves. Empirical studies on Instagram and Facebook show that brand authenticity is the persuasive mechanism driving purchase intent and digital engagement, underscoring its pivotal role in green brand success (Hu et al., 2023; Pittman et al., 2022).

Green social media, which refers to the use of digital platforms to promote environmentally friendly initiatives, has become unavoidable for brands aiming to engage with consumers and international stakeholders (Fang, 2024). However, its effectiveness depends on framing: messages perceived as authentic can strengthen consumer trust, whereas overstated claims risk accusations of greenwashing. Similarly, external signals such as sustainability labels and online reviews shape perceptions of credibility. Eco-labels, whether in hotels or consumer products, signal a commitment to environmental protection and advanced CSR practices, but their influence is moderated by review valence. Evidence shows that sustainability labels paired with positive reviews enhance authenticity perceptions, while the same labels with negative reviews can undermine trust (Lv et al., 2024). In sum, these findings emphasise that maintaining brand authenticity in today's media-saturated environment requires communication strategies that are transparent, balanced, and substantiated by evidence.

Consumer–brand connection

The psychological connection between consumers and brands is a vital factor shaping authenticity perceptions. Parasocial interaction theory posits that

audiences may develop one-sided relationships with media figures, a concept that extends to brands conveying social messages; these parasocial bonds foster a sense of personal connection that can increase consumer trust and tolerance toward CSR or activism initiatives (Xue & Mattila, 2024). Likewise, ideal self-congruence, or the alignment between a brand's image and the consumer's aspirational self, increases credibility by reflecting personal values (Olk, 2021). Further findings show that this congruence strengthens perceptions of authenticity and can inhibit greenwashing, although its effect depends on actual self-congruence, as a wide gap between real and ideal self reduces the authenticity impact (Olk, 2021). Taken together, these mechanisms illustrate that the stronger the consumer–brand connection, the greater the likelihood of positive authenticity judgments and resilience against purpose-washing skepticism.

Perceived sincerity & ethical integrity

Perceptions of sincerity and ethical integrity are central in evaluating whether brand activism is authentic or manipulative. Authenticity collapses when consumers perceive hypocrisy, which arises from visible contradictions between a brand's claims and its actions (Lv et al., 2024; Mueller-Bryson et al., 2025). Skepticism is further triggered when communication appears overly strategic, insincere, or detached from organisational reality, undermining trust in CSR initiatives (Cheah et al., 2023; Orazi & Chan, 2020). Beyond communication style, ethical considerations strongly shape credibility. As Budi Riharjo et al. (2025) note, consumers judge not only what brands say externally but also how they ethically treat internal stakeholders such as workers, reflecting a broader moral responsibility to respect and protect the natural world and human dignity as ends in themselves rather than means to profit. Additional contextual factors also determine authenticity perceptions. Failure severity matters: when brand misconduct is perceived as serious rather than trivial, consumers react more strongly with distrust and moral condemnation (Effendy & Xiao, 2025). Conflicting CSR information when external reports contradict a firm's self-reported sustainability achievements creates perceived hypocrisy and escalates skepticism, often leading to consumer backlash (Lewin & Warren, 2024). Finally, sustainable action, understood as proactive and tangible integration of environmental, cultural, and social sustainability into core practices, is the most decisive indicator of sincerity, distinguishing authentic commitments from superficial or short-lived campaigns that risk being dismissed as greenwashing (Smith & Rhiney, 2020). Collectively, these factors demonstrate that sincerity, moral integrity, and demonstrable actions are indispensable in building resilient perceptions of authenticity in brand social communications.

Consumer psychological and behavioural outcomes of authenticity perceptions

Perceptions of brand authenticity in social campaigns shape opinions and have broad implications for consumer attitudes and behaviours. Based on the literature mapping, these impacts can be grouped into four major categories. First, attitudinal outcomes include consumers' attitudes toward the brand, credibility, and product satisfaction. Second, behavioural outcomes refer to consumer tendencies to purchase, recommend, or actively support a brand. Third, relational & social outcomes describe long-term effects on consumer loyalty and engagement, including in the context of social advocacy. Finally, negative reactions may emerge when consumers perceive a brand's purpose as inauthentic. These reactions may include scepticism, boycotts, and perceptions of moral injustice.

Attitudinal outcomes

Consumer attitudes toward a brand are central to evaluating authenticity, particularly in the context of purpose-washing. Brand attitude refers to a consumer's tendency to react positively or negatively toward a brand after encountering an advertising stimulus, and prior research indicates that perceived congruence and authenticity both enhance these attitudes, shaping the sense of psychological closeness or distance consumers experience with the brand (Caruelle, 2024; Cheah et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2023; Mueller-Bryson et al., 2025; Namhyun, 2021; Orazi & Chan, 2020; M. Park et al., 2023; Smith & Rhiney, 2020; Wulf et al., 2022; Xue & Mattila, 2024). Authenticity also strengthens brand trust and credibility, reflecting consumers' confidence in the brand's integrity and its ability to fulfil promises (Caruelle, 2024; Smith & Rhiney, 2020; Walter et al., 2024).

At a corporate level, reputation and credibility become essential, where reputation captures the overall evaluation stakeholders hold about an organisation, while credibility refers to the belief that an organisation can deliver on its claims; both are enhanced when communications are perceived as ethically consistent (Keilmann & Koch, 2024; Orazi & Chan, 2020). Furthermore, authenticity has been found to strengthen anticipated product satisfaction, which emerges when consumers mentally simulate the personal benefits of product use, along with engagement credibility, defined as the perceived legitimacy of a brand's attempts to build meaningful connections with consumers (Keilmann & Koch, 2024; Yoon et al., 2024). Finally, authenticity strengthens psychological closeness, the sense of personal connection and identification consumers feel toward a brand, which has been shown to play an important role in loyalty, as for instance when consumers with stronger feminist identities display a higher willingness to support women-owned businesses in the absence of purplewashing (Li et al., 2024).

Behavioural outcomes

Beyond attitudes, authenticity perceptions also have significant behavioural implications. Consumers demonstrate stronger purchase intention toward brands seen as authentic and aligned with their values (Effendy & Xiao, 2025; Lv et al., 2024; Namhyun, 2021; Orazi & Chan, 2020; Papadopoulou et al., 2024; Pittman et al., 2022; Smith & Rhiney, 2020; Xue & Mattila, 2024; Yoon et al., 2024). This aligns with findings that in green demarketing campaigns, congruence between publicity and advertising can increase purchase intention through perceptions of brand honesty, particularly among consumers with higher corporate social responsibility orientation (Yoon et al., 2024). Authenticity also strengthens willingness to share, as consumers often overlook the inauthenticity of performative campaigns and reward brands with favourable attitudes, purchase intention, and social media engagement (Xue & Mattila, 2024). A similar effect occurs with willingness to pay a premium, where femvertising strategies and the absence of purplewashing enhance consumers' readiness to pay more for women-owned businesses, especially when they strongly identify as feminists, with psychological closeness explaining this effect (Li et al., 2024). Intention to support also grows, since authentic and concrete messages can fully mediate the relationship between message clarity and brand attitude while partially mediating the link with consumer support for initiatives such as women empowerment campaigns (M. Park et al., 2023). Authenticity further drives eWOM intention, where consumers are motivated to share positive brand-related experiences online (Namhyun, 2021). In the sustainability context, it even increases green purchase decisions, as consumers prefer environmentally friendly products perceived to be high in integrity (Fang, 2024).

Relational & social outcomes

Relational and social outcomes involve interpersonal relationships and interactions mediated by brand authenticity perceptions. Authenticity strengthens consumer loyalty to a brand (Budi Riharjo et al., 2025; Kang & Ro, 2024) and increases their engagement in brand-related activities (Lim et al., 2024). In contexts of social advocacy, such as transgender advocacy, consumers' perceptions of genuine support significantly enhance engagement within the target community (Lim et al., 2024). At the individual level, authenticity fosters intrapersonal identity, reflected in alignment with one's ideal self and a sense of self-realisation, as well as interpersonal authenticity, where relationships with others develop naturally and fairly (Kang & Ro, 2024). Conversely, the absence of authenticity can trigger negative consumer complaint behaviours (CCBs), which manifest across five dimensions: voice to external organisations, voice to the firm, voice to acquaintances, exit, and acquiescence. Evidence shows that perceptions of corporate hypocrisy, often linked to greenwashing, amplify moral inequity perceptions that in turn heighten these behaviours, from spreading

negative word-of-mouth to terminating the brand relationship entirely (Wang & Jung, 2025). Collectively, these findings underscore that authenticity is not merely symbolic but a relational mechanism that strengthens long-term brand–public bonds and mitigates costly consumer backlash.

Negative reactions

Failing to maintain perceptions of authenticity can trigger significant adverse consumer reactions. One such response is skepticism, or doubt about the brand's motives, believing it merely capitalises on social issues for profit (Lim et al., 2024). Other reactions include backlash from stakeholders such as consumers and social activists (Lewin & Warren, 2024), which can damage the brand's overall image. In many cases, consumers engage in brand avoidance or spread negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) due to perceived insincerity (Sajid et al., 2024; Wang & Jung, 2025). In more severe cases, consumers may perceive corporate moral inequity, viewing the company as immoral or as violating fundamental social values (Wang & Jung, 2025). Underlying these outcomes are important psychological mechanisms. First, purpose-washing evokes strong affective consequences: perceptions of hypocrisy often elicit moral emotions such as anger, contempt, and disgust, which intensify moral outrage toward the firm (Wagner et al., 2020; Lewin & Warren, 2024). Second, at the cognitive level, conflicting CSR information fosters harsh moral judgments because consumers attribute self-serving motives to the brand (Lewin & Warren, 2024), reinforcing skepticism and perceptions of deception. Finally, social identity theory explains why purpose-washing feels especially threatening: consumers seek alignment between brand values and their self-concept, and when this congruence is broken, they distance themselves to protect their identity (Xiao et al., 2022). These reactions show that authenticity is not merely a preference but a normative expectation, the violation of which can result in serious consequences.

Conclusion, limitation, and future research

This research involves a systematic review of 33 peer-reviewed studies spanning 2020 to 2025, focusing on how consumer views of brand authenticity are formed amid various purpose-washing tactics like greenwashing, femwashing, rainbow washing, and wokewashing. The findings highlight that authenticity remains a central determinant of consumer trust, brand attitude, and purchase intention. A rising demand from consumers is the congruence between what a brand claims regarding social values and how it conducts itself internally. Absence of this congruence often triggers scepticism, negative word-of-mouth, and a tendency to avoid the brand due to perceived hypocrisy and inauthenticity. Key antecedents of authenticity perceptions include message clarity, cause–brand fit, communication strategy, consumer–brand connection, and perceived sincerity.

Moreover, authenticity influences individual behaviours and broader social responses such as loyalty, engagement in brand advocacy, or public backlash.

From a managerial perspective, this study underlines the importance of ethical consistency and transparency in socially driven campaigns. Brands are advised to move beyond symbolic actions and commit to genuine social involvement. Campaigns should be grounded in strategic alignment with brand values, supported by evidence-based actions, and communicated through transparent channels, as failing to do so risks eroding credibility and long-term brand equity.

However, this study is not without limitations. First, it focuses exclusively on journal articles published in English and indexed in major academic databases, which may exclude relevant insights from non-indexed, regional, or practitioner-oriented literature. Second, the study relies on the data and analyses reported in the reviewed articles, most of which are cross-sectional, reflecting the current methodological dominance in the literature. While this does not limit the review itself, it highlights areas where future research could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs. Third, although the study maps key themes and trends, it does not provide a higher-level visual synthesis (e.g., meta-analytical integration or conceptual framework) due to the diversity in measurement approaches and research contexts.

Future research can build upon this review by refining the conceptual map identified here. This study does not construct an integrated framework due to the diversity in methods, contexts, and the qualitative nature of the SLR. The refined map can then be used to build frameworks that are empirically tested across different cultures and demographic segments. While this review highlights publication trends over the past five years, future longitudinal research is needed that collects data across multiple time points to capture how consumer perceptions of authenticity change over time, particularly during brand crises or social controversies. Additionally, further exploration is needed on purpose-washing variants beyond the predominant attention on greenwashing, with femwashing in particular remaining significantly underexplored. Future research should also consider consumer judgments beyond predominantly positive responses, by examining negative reactions to provide a more balanced understanding of authenticity evaluations. Finally, integrating neuropsychological or behavioural tracking tools (e.g., eye-tracking, biometric feedback) can offer deeper insights into how consumers cognitively and emotionally process authenticity cues.

Author contribution

Rihhadata Aisy: Conceptualisation, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Resources, Writing-Original Draft. **Mohammad Iqbal:** Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing-Review and Editing. **Anni Rahimah:** Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing-Review and Editing.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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