

Market Research: The Impacts of ESG Marketing Messaging on Consumer Affinity and Loyalty
for a Legacy Fashion Brand

Elizabeth Lindsey
Boston University, Metropolitan College
MET AD 856 – Market & Economic Research
Marcus Goncalves

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Background and Introduction	4
Management Decision Problem & Market Research Problem	4
Theoretical Framework	5
Research Design & Methodology	6
Data Preparation: Survey Results	7
Data Analysis: Survey Results	8
Data Preparation: Web Scraping	10
Key Takeaways:	14
Conclusion	15
Appendix	16
Appendix C: Web Scraping Data	20
Appendix D: Ralph Lauren ESG Initiatives	26
References:	28

Executive Summary

The increasing urgency of climate change and new government regulations have pushed fashion companies to improve transparency and accountability in their sustainability practices. In response to California's climate disclosure requirements taking effect January 1, 2026 (Pullins et al., 2025), The Company has launched new Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) initiatives to reduce its environmental impact and strengthen consumer trust. This research explores how these initiatives can be communicated effectively to improve brand perception and loyalty among values-driven consumers.

The Management Decision Problem (MDP) guiding this study is: How can The Company effectively communicate its ESG-related initiatives to current and potential customers in a way that enhances consumer perception and builds brand affinity and loyalty? The Marketing Research Problem (MRP) is: To determine which messages, communication channels, and visibility strategies most effectively convey The Company's ESG initiatives to improve brand perception, consumer trust, and purchase intent.

The study applies Signaling Theory, which examines how organizations use communication to signal authenticity and values to consumers. A mixed-methods approach was used, including primary survey research to analyze consumer attitudes and secondary research to review sustainability communication strategies across the fashion industry.

The findings highlight the importance of clear, credible, and accessible ESG communication in building consumer trust. By focusing on message transparency, alignment between marketing and operations, and relatable storytelling, Ralph Lauren can transform sustainability initiatives into a strategic advantage—strengthening reputation, trust, and long-term loyalty.

Background and Introduction

The growing global concern over climate change has led governments to introduce stricter climate regulations, which require companies to disclose their environmental impacts, reduce carbon emissions, and enhance supply chain transparency. Ralph Lauren has launched new initiatives to improve its climate strategy, presenting a marketing opportunity to highlight responsible practices. An effective strategy that prioritizes climate issues can increase brand value, deepen connections with current customers, and attract a growing base of values-driven shoppers, including the 96% of Gen Z consumers (Upton-Clark, 2025).

Effectively communicating these efforts while showing the consumer that Ralph Lauren values the climate and their experience is essential to protecting reputation and turning regulatory compliance into a competitive advantage.

Management Decision Problem & Market Research Problem

Ralph Lauren faces the challenge of determining how best to communicate those initiatives and its core sustainability values to its consumers to positively impact customer perception and build brand loyalty. This management decision problem is focused on answering the question: “how can the brand effectively communicate sustainability-related initiatives to current and potential customers in a way that enhances consumer perception and builds brand affinity and loyalty?” The management research problem focused on identifying the necessary research to be undertaken to resolve the problem (Goncalves, 2024). The MRP is thus focused on identifying specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-sensitive objectives.

At the core of the actionable research questions was identifying the baseline concerns and values that influence consumer opinion as they relate to sustainability claims. Without

understanding what sustainability values consumers care about, and how it influences buying behavior, any marketing efforts may convey the wrong message and produce poor results. Once the brand point of view and message is identified, research must be conducted to determine where and how consumers collect their data in order to deliver the message where they are.

Management Decision Problem: How can Ralph Lauren effectively leverage marketing messaging around ESG initiatives to positively influence brand perception, increasing loyalty?

Market Research Problem: Identify where customers receive signals and determine how those signals influence brand perception, trust, and purchasing behavior.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, the Signaling Theory is used as the theoretical framework for analyzing the outcomes of the research. Signaling Theory relates the sharing or signaling of information from one party to another and how the sender of the message, in this case Ralph Lauren, must decide what information should be conveyed to consumers, and how (Osburg et al., 2022) In the case of this research, the signals convey sustainability messaging intended to impact the perception of the brand by the receiver. In applying Signaling Theory as the framework for this research, we will measure several key variables as they relate to the MDP:

1. How and where consumers receive these messages
2. What impact these messages have on the perception of the brand
3. How perception impacts buying intent and behavior
4. What messages would drive further impact on consumer perception

Research Design & Methodology

The research method used was a combination of both primary research and secondary research, which was collected and analyzed. Primary data was collected through a structured

survey questionnaire using Survey Monkey. The survey was given to a sample population, with data collection on age, gender and whether or not sustainability is an important personal factor for use in statistical analysis. The sample audience population was asked 11 questions as outlined in Table 1A on demographic, visibility, perception, greenwashing, loyalty/trust and willingness.

The descriptive research data will be analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis, identifying the mean, median, mode, variance, standard deviation, five-number summary, and frequencies of the data collected which will provide a clearer picture of how customers perceive the company's sustainability signaling.

Secondary data will be collected using the marketing and sales web-scraping technique using ParseHub. The data that will be collected will include both qualitative and quantitative data consisting of online public documentation, market trends, and competitor market strategies. These variables will provide a clear illustration of the target population's behaviors in response to the company's sustainability communication strategies. The explanatory research data will be analyzed using statistical and sentimental analysis through ParseHub, which will provide insight into how and where Ralph Lauren can improve its sustainability marketing strategy.

Data Preparation: Survey Results

To begin preparation for analysis of the collected survey results, the data was cleaned and validated to ensure no duplicate responses were present. Data was also reviewed for validity, ensuring that no bias was introduced through incomplete or unanswered questions. Following validation and cleaning, the data was then organized based on the content of the question: open-ended, Likert scale, or multiple choice.

Data from each question was prepared on a question-by-question basis. For each question presented as a Likert scale, each response option was assigned a numeric value, 1-5, 1 representing the lowest or least-favorable response and 5 representing the highest. This scale was preserved across all similar questions to ensure consistency in data analysis. These 1-5 values provide the basis for calculating key statistical analyses, including: frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations for key variables.

Data is presented in mixed-media format with graphical presentation providing crucial visualization of trends for rating scale-based questions in particular. These graphical representations include: How strongly does a company's sustainability image influence your opinion of the brand? (Figure 1B); How likely are you to purchase or repurchase from a brand that shares your sustainability values? (Figure 2B); How willing would you be willing to pay a premium for a company's product if it shared your sustainability values? (Figure 3B) and How familiar are you with Ralph Lauren's sustainability initiatives? (Figure 4B)

Other key descriptive data is presented verbally, including data from the open-ended questions, regarding platforms and how the brand can increase credibility. This descriptive data was analyzed for sentiment and grouped according to similar feedback, presented in Table 5B.

Data Analysis: Survey Results

Once data was collected, cleaned and organized, three key statistical analyses were conducted Two Z tests were run examining the relationship between perceived sustainability and consumer buying intent and whether or not customers were willing to pay a premium for a sustainable product. Based on these analyses, further testing was conducted to determine if there

was a significant difference in the buying intent of individuals who reported sustainability as an important consideration vs those who did not.

For all tests, the industry standard margin of error and confidence interval were used, of 95%. The total sample size (n) was 41 individuals, categorized by age, gender, and whether or not they self-reported sustainability as important to them.

Z-test: Consumer Purchasing Intent

The first Z analysis tested the hypotheses that shared sustainability value impacted the consumer's willingness to purchase or repurchase a product from the company, as outlined in Table 1E. The population mean for this dataset was determined to be 3.0 as quantified as the neutral Likert scale response. The sample of respondents yielded a mean of 4.2 as the average likelihood of purchase, indicating an overall strong positive relationship between sustainability and purchase intent. The standard deviation for the sample size of $n=41$ was 0.68, producing a standard error of .11.

Conducting the Z analysis on this data indicates a Z value of 11.3, far exceeding the necessary 1.96 critical value expected for a 95% confidence interval. As a result, we reject the null hypothesis and can conclude that the perceived sustainability of a brand has a statistically significant impact on consumer purchasing or repurchasing decisions.

T-test: Consumer Purchasing Intent vs Reported Care About Sustainability

Following initial Z testing, a comparative analysis of consumer purchasing intent was further examined as related to self-reported care for sustainability. T-testing was conducted between two groups: Group 1 ($n=30$), who reported caring about sustainability when purchasing and Group 2: ($n=11$) who reported that sustainability was not an important factor for purchasing

products. These independent variables were compared with the likelihood of a purchasing or repurchasing a product from a brand with shared ESG-related values, measured from 1-5 on a Likert scale.

The independent samples t-test showed a significant difference in the purchasing intent of each group, with those reporting affinity for sustainability showing higher average purchase intent (mean = 4.37, standard deviation = 0.49) versus those who did not (mean = 3.73, standard deviation = 0.9). T-testing yielded a result of 2.21, with a p value of 0.033, well within the margin of error at a 95% confidence level. As a result, we can conclude that consumers who value sustainability are significantly more likely to purchase from brands with shared values

Z-test 2: Willingness to Pay a Premium

Finally, an additional Z analysis was conducted to determine if there is a relationship between customer's shared sustainability values with a brand and their willingness to pay a premium for products as outlined in Table 2E.

Like the previous T-test, the population mean for the dataset was determined to be the neutral Likert scale value of 3, indicating a neutral response to the question. The n=41 sample size yielded a mean value of 3.63, indicating a moderate relationship between shared sustainability values and willingness to pay a premium. The standard deviation was calculated to be 0.80, with a standard error of 0.13. This analysis yielded a Z value of 5.04 and an associated p-value of less than 0.00003, indicating a strong significance level. Because the Z value is over the critical value associated with the 95% confidence interval and margin of error, we reject the null hypothesis and can conclude that consumers are willing to pay more for products from brands that share their sustainability values.

Data Preparation: Web Scraping

The purpose of web scraping was to analyze how major fashion brands communicate their ESG initiatives through their websites and social media platforms. The visibility and credibility of sustainability messaging could then be evaluated with how they may influence brand perception.

The research followed a causal-comparative design aimed at examining the relationship between the quality of ESG communication and consumer perception. According to Signaling Theory, organizations use communication to signal their values, intentions, and authenticity to stakeholders (Goncalves, 2024). In this context, ESG-related messaging is a signal of corporate responsibility. Brands that communicate their sustainability efforts effectively are expected to be more trusted by consumers, influencing their brand loyalty.

Ralph Lauren was selected as the focal brand for this study due to its strong brand recognition and its relevant sustainability goals under the Create with Intent initiative. To provide meaningful context, four comparable brands (Hugo Boss, Tommy Hilfiger, Lacoste, and Burberry) were also analyzed. These brands were chosen because they target similar demographics and occupy the same market. Together, they offer a relevant basis for understanding how ESG communication differs within the fashion industry.

Because many corporate websites restrict automated data collection, all information was gathered manually and organized in Excel. A standardized checklist was used to ensure consistency across brands. The checklist included:

- Page characteristics: URL, page type (homepage, sustainability page, report, or press release), and navigation depth (number of clicks from the homepage).
- Visibility indicators: Presence of ESG content in primary menus, banners, or footers.

- Credibility indicators: Specificity of sustainability claims, inclusion of measurable goals, timeframes, references to third-party certifications, and supporting documentation.
- Greenwashing indicators: Instances of vague, exaggerated, or unsupported statements.

In addition to scraping website data, each brand's Instagram account was analyzed to examine how sustainability messaging was presented on social media. Posts were coded according to ESG theme, tone, and engagement level. The analysis revealed that none of the brands posted regularly about sustainability practices or achievements. Most ESG-related content came from old campaign mentions from several years ago or their current social responsibility programs. Surprisingly, third-party posts referencing the brands' sustainability claims often received very negative comments where users expressed their skepticism and frustration over what they perceived as misleading, exaggerated, or misplaced claims.

After data was collected and cleaned the qualitative analysis indicated that most brands have dedicated sustainability sections on their websites and the depth and transparency of their content vary significantly. Many brands rely on broad, aspirational language that lacks measurable data or independent verification. When combined with the negative responses observed on social media, these findings suggest that consumers seek specificity, authenticity, and accountability in a brand's values and campaigns.

Historical Research: Recap of Ralph Lauren's Sustainability Plan

Ralph Lauren, a slow fashion brand known for its high-quality products, launched its *Design the Change* ESG circular economy framework (Gutentag et al., 2024), outlining the brand's goals to use 100% sustainable materials by 2025, as shown in Figure 1D (Louvet et al., n.d.). Despite the *Global Citizenship & Sustainability Report* for 2025 reports 98% of units produced are sustainable (Ralph Lauren releases 2025, n.d.), the brand performed beyond its

expectations (Outlook for Fiscal 2026, n.d). In the last five years, the company's stock value increased by 318% reaching over \$300 per share, a gross profit of 68.6% (+12.5%), and quarterly revenue growth of 13.7% (Yahoo Finance, n.d.). Ralph Lauren ascribes its success to the demand, pricing leverage, and geographical expansion (Outlook for Fiscal 2026, n.d.).

Impact Sustainability Advertising has on Consumer Perception

Sustainability marketing research is sparse, lacking experimental proof (Gutentag & Russell, 2024). However, data suggests that implementing environmental and socially sustainable advertising embellish consumer discernment. Sander, Föhl, Walter, and Demmer (2021) proposed a study investigating how sustainability advertising influences consumer perceptions on brand personality, advertising credibility, and consumer attitudes. Using a structural equation model (SEM) and analysis of variance (ANOVA) of 166 German adults, results showed that environmental and social sustainability advertising improved consumer attitude and brand credibility with environmental sustainability having a stronger influence than social sustainability. All hypotheses were confirmed, implying sustainable advertising cultivates positive and genuine perceptions on brands (Sander et al., 2021).

Four Dimensional Framework - Environmental, Societal, Ethical, & Technological

Rathee and Milfeld (2024) notes that consumers are increasingly drawn to brands that establish sustainability and examine strategies that motivate consumers' sustainable behaviors. The framework emphasizes three dimensions; environmental as the main driver (Sander et al., 2021), social, and economic (Rathee et al., 2024). Peattie and Peattie (2009), and Lim (2016) highlights two more dimensions; ethical and technological, synthesizing moral philosophy (Lim, W. M., 2016). That is whether advertisements are communicated in physical or online

communities which can impact all stakeholders (McKenzie-Mohr D.,1999). Identifying goals and investing in sustainability for each dimension reinforces social responsibility, improves brand reputation, and mitigates business risk (Dyllick and Hockerts 2002).

Key Takeaways:

As a result of the survey, research shows that a majority (73.17%) of survey respondents of all ages confirm that sustainability is an important consideration when choosing a product. While statistical analysis of survey data indicates that sustainability has only a moderate level of impact on consumer's overall perception of the brand, it was found that there is a strong, significant positive relationship between the perceived sustainability of a brand and consumer's willingness to purchase and repurchase from them.

This is especially apparent when comparing groups who identify sustainability as an important personal consideration for themselves and those who don't. Those self-reported with an affinity for sustainability were significantly more likely to purchase from a brand that shared their values. These consumers are also significantly more likely to be willing to pay a premium for products from companies with shared values.

Finally, 64.41 % of respondents get their information on sustainability directly from web-based sources, blogs and product websites. 39% from Instagram and 43% from other sources including television ads, in-store collateral, and search/AI. Sentiment analysis of open ended questions also reveals several key factors that Ralph Lauren can leverage to increase brand perception of sustainability (Table 5B) including: validation of sustainability initiatives with proof of action, better visibility of messaging, increased transparency, clarity on authenticity and motivation, and leveraging brand reputation. Overall, the website and social media analysis of

these brands shows that while fashion brands have embraced the language of sustainability, their communication practices often fail to meet consumer expectations for credibility and consistency and that consumers are slow to trust brands not founded on sustainable principles. These findings show that effective ESG communication requires visibility and trustworthiness. Brands that communicate frequently, transparently, and with evidence-based claims are more likely to build lasting consumer trust and loyalty.

Conclusion

While survey data provided statistically significant insights into the relationship between sustainability perception and customer buying behavior, there were limitations to the study, especially in a limited sample size. However, it is clear that consumers seek to purchase products from brands that share their values, especially those who consider sustainability important in their daily purchasing decisions. Supporting data from historical research shows that sustainability messaging is important for marketing initiatives, but can run the risk of drawing attention to the company in a negative light and increase perception of greenwashing.

As a result, Ralph Lauren should seek to conduct further research into the exact messages that resonate with target audiences on specific topics and leverage the descriptive data collected in the survey to refine marketing strategies. This should include, as noted by web-scraping and historical research, a focus on building trust and authenticity with consumers and showing tangible action and results from sustainability initiatives. It is also crucial to ensure that these messages are delivered on the appropriate platforms, and further research should be conducted to understand how consumer preferences differ within each of the major platforms reported: web, Instagram, and search.

Appendix

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Table 1A: Survey topics and questions

Topic	Question
Demographic	Please select your gender
Demographic	What is your age?
Demographic	Would you say sustainability is an important consideration for you when purchasing a product?
Visibility	On what platform(s) do you research brands before purchase?
Perception	How strongly does a company's sustainability image influence your opinion of the brand?
Greenwashing	How likely are you to believe a company's ESG messaging is genuine?
Loyalty	How likely are you to purchase or repurchase from a brand that shares your sustainability values?
Willingness	How willing would you be willing to pay a premium for a company's product if it shared your sustainability values?
Awareness	How familiar are you with Ralph Lauren's sustainability initiatives?
Credibility	How credible do you feel The Company's sustainability claims are?
Trust	What factors would make you trust Ralph Lauren's sustainability claim more?

Appendix B: Survey Results



Figure 1B: Consumer consideration of sustainability in purchasing behavior.

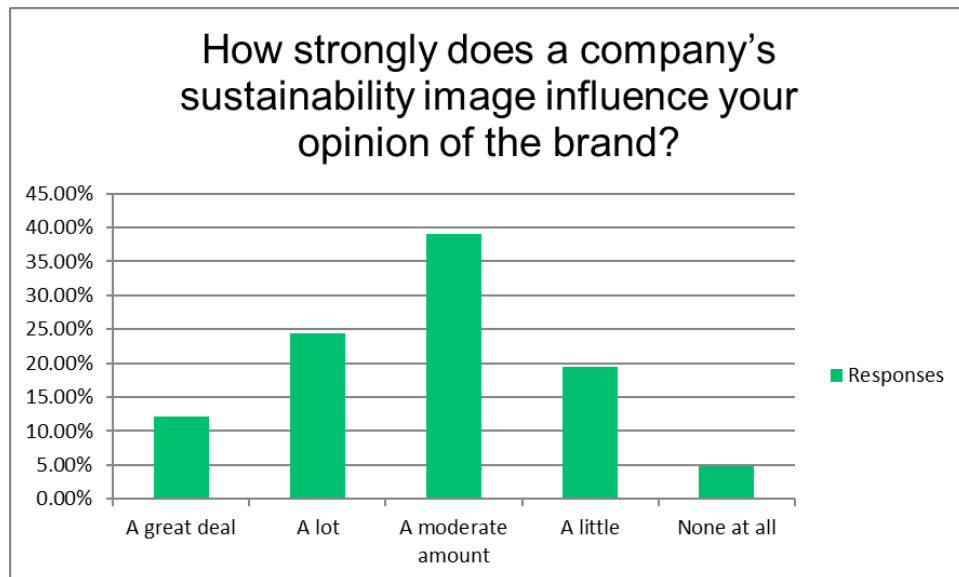


Figure 2B: Sustainability influence of brand perception by consumers.

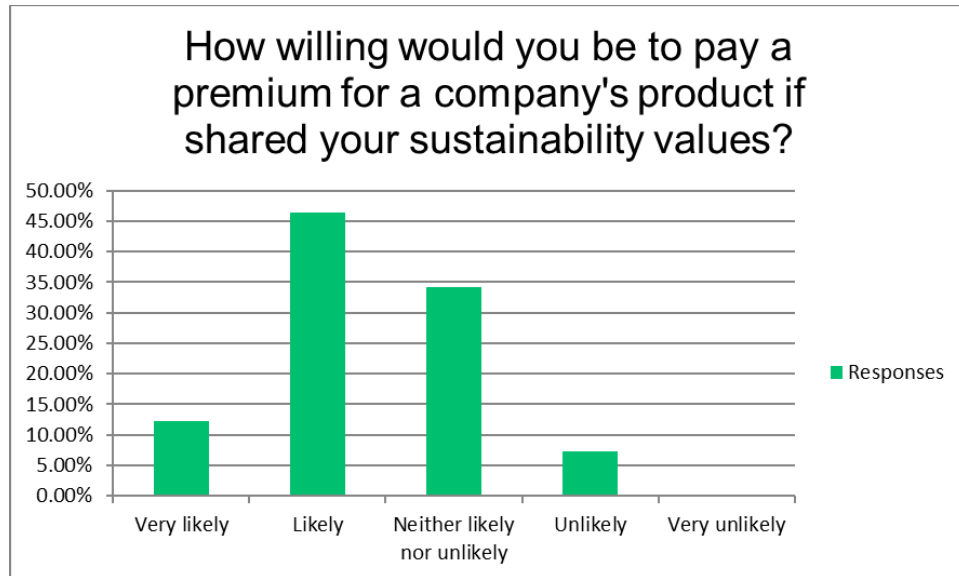


Figure 3B: Willingness to pay premium for product from brands with shared values.

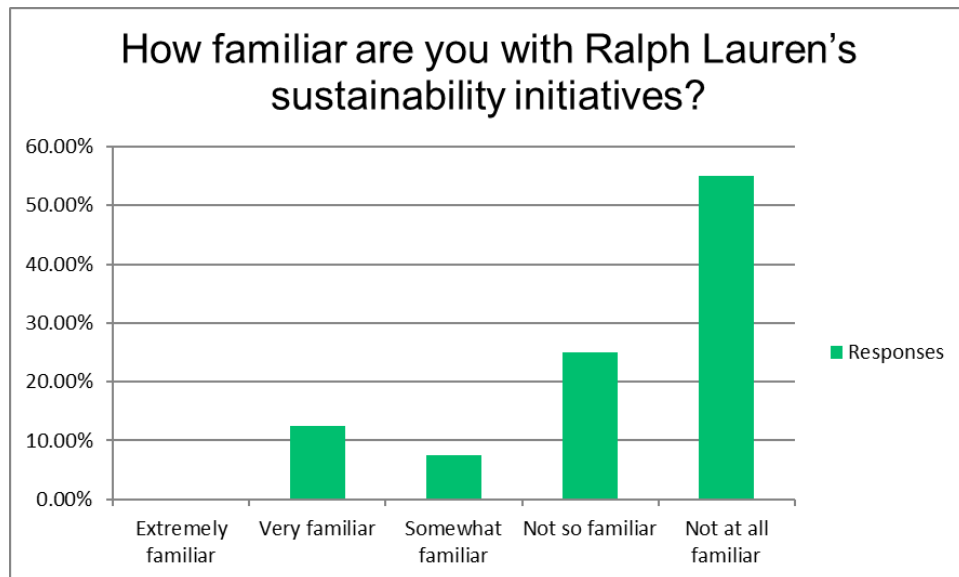


Figure 4B: Familiarity with Ralph Lauren's sustainability initiatives.

Table 5B: Sentiment analysis of open-ended survey responses.

Sentiment	Description	Keyword Trends
Validation of sustainability initiatives	Proof of sustainability. Shared data, third-party certifications, ESG reports, etc.	“Data,” “Proof,” “Third-party,” “Transparency,” “Empirical evidence”
Better visibility of messaging	More visible messaging about sustainability on Ralph Lauren owned channels.	“More ads,” “Campaigns,” “High visibility,” “Show what they’re doing”
Material and manufacturing transparency	Better information on the sustainability of their manufacturing practices and material choices	“Organic materials,” “Chemical use,” “Clarification on mission” “Labor treatment during production”
Leveraging brand reputation	Well-established brand reputation supports credibility	“Integrity,” “Longevity,” “Been around for years”
Authenticity and motivation	Tangible proof of authentically-driven action	“If they didn’t do it as PR,” “Not impactful as marketed”
Little awareness of efforts	No visibility into brand sustainability practices	“Unsure,” “Unknowledgeable,” “I don’t know anything about it”

Table 2C: Tommy Hilfiger Web Data

[illegible]

Table 3C: Burberry Web Data

[illegible]

Table 5C: Lacoste Web Data

[illegible]

Table 6C: Social Media Data

Appendix D: Ralph Lauren ESG Initiatives

Figure 1D: List of main ESG related initiatives by Ralph Lauren

- Prioritizing sustainable product materials, design, packaging, and their traceability through a circular economy system.
 - Use raw materials primarily while supporting the NGO Rainforest Action Network Forest preservation (goal to reach 100% sustainably sourced cotton, recycled polyester, and viscose per unit of production by 2025).
 - Selective on suppliers, ensuring sustainability practices are followed, and conducting audits with Canopy Style to verify material (viscose) is responsibly sourced.
 - Superior waste management processes and water stewardship.
 - Use of renewable energy sources.
 - Fighting climate change by reducing carbon emissions.
 - Limiting chemical usage during manufacturing.
 - Promoting RL Center for Cancer Care and the program for improving children's literacy.
 - Having high regards towards cultural sensitivity and multiculturalism using Ralph Lauren's Next Great Chapter: Drive strategy.
 - Employee health, safety & well-being as well as implementing diversity and inclusion.
- (Louvet et al., n.d.).

Appendix E: Hypotheses

Table 1E: Z-test hypotheses, buying intent

H₀: There is no significant difference in consumer buying intent based on shared sustainability values of a brand.

H₁: There is a significant increase in consumer in consumer buying intent based on shared sustainability values of a brand.

Table 2E: Z-test hypotheses, willingness to pay premium

H₀: Customers are not willing to pay a premium for products from brands they perceive as sustainable.

H₁: Customers are willing to pay a premium for products from brands they perceive as sustainable

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