



# Telling the Right Story: How Brand and Product Narratives Shape Trust and Intention in Sustainable Fashion

*Exploring the Mediating Roles of Authenticity, Brand Value, and Emotional  
Connection, and the Moderating Effect of Narrative Transportation*

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## **Abstract**

In sustainable fashion, storytelling has emerged as a critical tool for brand differentiation and consumer engagement. This study investigates the impact of storytelling type (brand-focused versus product-focused) on consumer trust and purchase intention, while also examining the mediating roles of perceived authenticity, perceived brand value and emotional connection. Narrative intensity (high vs low) was tested as a potential moderator, and additional variables such as perceived sustainability, sustainability habits, and self-identity were explored. A between-subjects experimental design was employed, exposing participants (N = 214) to one of five storytelling conditions. Contrary to expectations, brand storytelling had a stronger effect on trust than product storytelling. Results revealed that perceived authenticity fully mediated the relationship between storytelling type and both trust and purchase intention, whereas emotional connection and brand value did not serve as significant mediators. Narrative intensity did not moderate the effects as hypothesised. However, exploratory analyses highlighted the strong influence of perceived sustainability on trust, and the role of individual sustainability habits in shaping perceived brand sustainability under low narrative conditions. Additionally, self-identity was found to significantly predict trust in high-intensity narrative contexts. These findings underscore the importance of communicating authenticity and consumer alignment in storytelling strategies for sustainable fashion brands.

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**Keywords:** Sustainable fashion, storytelling, brand heritage, product heritage, perceived authenticity, consumer trust, purchase intention, narrative transportation

## **Resumo**

O storytelling tem se tornado essencial na diferenciação de marcas e no envolvimento do consumidor na moda sustentável. Este estudo investiga como o tipo de narrativa (marca vs. produto) afeta a confiança do consumidor e a intenção de compra, analisando também os papéis mediadores da autenticidade percebida, do valor da marca e da ligação emocional. A intensidade narrativa foi testada como moderador, e foram exploradas variáveis como percepção de sustentabilidade, hábitos sustentáveis e autoidentidade. Através de um experimento com 214 participantes, os resultados mostraram que o storytelling de marca gerou mais confiança do que o de produto. A autenticidade percebida mediou totalmente a relação entre tipo de narrativa e os resultados, enquanto valor da marca e ligação emocional não foram mediadores significativos. A intensidade narrativa não moderou os efeitos, mas análises exploratórias revelaram que a percepção de sustentabilidade foi um forte preditor de confiança, especialmente entre consumidores com hábitos sustentáveis. Estes hábitos também influenciaram como a sustentabilidade da marca foi percebida sob narrativas menos imersivas. Por fim, a autoidentidade previu a confiança apenas em contextos de alta intensidade narrativa.

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## **1. Introduction**

Storytelling has consistently been used as a powerful tool for brand differentiation and consumer engagement within the sustainable fashion industry. While providing factual information about a product's composition may offer a necessary level of understanding, a compelling narrative has the potential to establish emotional resonance and build consumer trust. In a competitive and increasingly saturated market, stories help brands stand out by creating meaning that extends beyond the product itself. Sustainability narratives, often focused on environmental responsibility, ethical labour practices, and transparency, are now widely employed by brands seeking to demonstrate their commitment to positive change.

However, heritage-based storytelling, typically associated with long-established or luxury brands, remains relatively underexplored within the context of sustainable fashion. This approach adds depth by drawing on ideas of tradition, craftsmanship, identity, and lasting relevance. Despite the increasing prevalence of sustainability narratives within marketing, the relative impact of different storytelling narratives, namely product or brand-focused, remains unclear. This raises a key question: why do consumers connect with certain types of stories, and which approach is more effective in building trust and encouraging positive behaviour?

Authenticity has become a central driver of brand engagement, as modern consumers seek more meaningful connections with the brands they support. For sustainable brands in particular, storytelling presents an opportunity to communicate not just what is being sold, but why the brand exists and what values it represents. Consumers today are more aware, critical, and particularly selective, seeking out brands whose narratives reflect their personal ideals and ethical values. In this context, storytelling should go beyond surface-level marketing claims to reflect a genuine sense of purpose. A well-crafted narrative can establish a brand's identity in just a few moments, making it easier for consumers to recognise and trust its mission.

In addition to brand-level storytelling, the sustainable fashion consumer also tends to pay close attention to the attributes of individual products. Many consumers assess the quality and origin of materials, as well as the methods used in production, when forming perceptions of brand integrity. A product-focused narrative can therefore play a crucial role by reinforcing the brand's values through tangible cues, such as local sourcing, traditional techniques, or natural fibres.

While brand storytelling communicates core identity and philosophy, product storytelling signals these through tangible and verifiable details. Both approaches create value, but their relative effectiveness in shaping consumer attitudes within sustainable fashion remains unclear.

This study aims to explore whether product-focused or brand-focused heritage storytelling is more effective in increasing consumer trust and purchase intention, particularly in the context of small, emerging or niche sustainable fashion brands. The research further investigates the mediating roles of perceived authenticity, perceived brand value, and emotional connection in shaping consumer responses. Finally, it examines the moderating effect of narrative transportation, or the degree to which consumers become mentally and emotionally absorbed in a story. By addressing these questions, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how storytelling strategies influence consumer behaviour in sustainable fashion, and offers practical insights for brands looking to craft more effective and authentic communications.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Storytelling in Marketing**

In the realm of marketing, storytelling plays a crucial role in creating meaningful connections between brands and consumers, particularly as traditional advertising loses its appeal (Whitler, 2019; Aimé, 2023). The human memory is a combination of stories, used to index, store and retrieve information (Schank, 1999, p. 12), where touchpoints are used to create automatic awareness, comprehension, and empathy among viewers (Woodside, 2010). Storytelling is no longer a one-way street from brand to consumer, rather a collaborative process where brand meaning is co-created by the interpretations of multiple stakeholders (Aimé, 2023; Hatch & Schultz, 2010). An emotional connection to a brand can form when consumer decisions are slightly guided, namely by building connections and demonstrating product superiority, both of which are vital to marketing success (Barney & Jones, 2023). By shifting communication of the brand image to one that emits authenticity and sincerity, all while maintaining a consumer-centric approach, brands can cultivate consumer trust by telling the right story. In turn fostering brand loyalty while boosting engagement and influencing purchasing decisions (Aimé, 2023; Barney & Jones, 2023). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of brand storytelling depends on several key factors, which is why not every story will tug on those heart strings. These include degree of communicated brand heritage and narrative transportation, in turn affecting perceived authenticity of the message, perceived brand value and the viewer's emotional connection to the brand. Inevitably, playing a crucial role in shaping consumer trust and purchase intention.

#### **2.1.1. Heritage Storytelling**

Brand heritage serves as a cue for authenticity, emphasising tradition, longevity, and deep-rooted values that establish trust and credibility (Aimé, 2023). By referencing history, heritage storytelling reinforces brand reliability by signalling long-standing stability and quality (Barney & Jones, 2023). Narratives that ring true to people, surrounding landscapes, practices, beliefs and communities, all play a crucial role in differentiating a brand. This sets it apart and creates more than a mere transactional relationship, adding traditional and cultural value in the mix (Aimé, 2023; Garczarek-Bak et al., 2024). On top of this, heritage storytelling moulds emotional

connections, saving the consumer cognitive energy by easing the process of sense-making, further deepening consumer attachment and driving long-term loyalty (Rose et al., 2016). As a result, consumer experience is elevated by increased pleasure derived from meaningful narratives, which increase the likelihood that the consumer will want to interact with or invest in the brand (Aimé, 2023; Woodside, 2010). When brand narratives resonate with the consumer, it can build brand awareness, comprehension, empathy, recognition and recall; a general presence of the brand in the minds of consumers (Woodside, 2010). As consumers think of the brand more, the brand might feature within their self-concept, also known as the self-brand connection. In essence, meaning, how much a brand becomes a part of their identity. This connection influences consumer behaviour, such as trust and purchase intention (Aimé, 2023; Gosline et al., 2017; Rose et al., 2016). Having authenticity as the focal point, led by strong brand narrative driving emotional engagement, heritage storytelling becomes a powerful tool for solidifying consumer relations and influencing purchasing behaviour. In this study, two types of heritage storytelling can be identified as outlined by van Laer et al. (2019), as the effects of both can be distinguished.

### **2.1.2. Brand versus Product Storytelling**

Brand heritage storytelling focuses on the brand's essence, values and mission, reinforcing its credibility and authenticity (Garczarek-Bak et al., 2024). Consumers are more likely to engage with brand-level narratives when they are consistent and emotionally resonant (Neumann et al., 2020). These narratives frame the brand as some higher-order construct, as Park and Chang (2022) note, shaping consumer preferences by presenting the brand as a meaningful experience rather than just a provider of goods (Garczarek-Bak et al., 2024; Neumeier, 2015; Ogilvy; 1985; Zyman, 2000).

In contrast, product heritage storytelling focuses on specific offerings, highlighting features, benefits, and user experiences to prompt immediate consumer interest and action. Product heritage storytelling highlights material quality and well-established manufacturing processes, increasing a product's perceived value and exclusivity. Product storytelling was found to be particularly effective in immersive digital contexts, where narratives centered around tangible product attributes facilitate consumer trust and engagement (van Laer et al., 2019).

## 2.2. Communicating Sustainability in Fashion

The fashion industry is one of the most resource-intensive sectors, significantly contributing to climate change through environmental degradation, overproduction, and poor waste management, all in the name of consumer demand for fleeting trends. However, thanks to the wealth of information provided by the internet, consumers have become increasingly interested and aware of how organisations choose to operate, along with scandals of past and present. As a result, brands face increasing pressure from all stakeholders to become more sustainable and transparent in their business practices.

Labelling items and practices as *green* has been a common signal used to get a message across in the past. But what exactly does it mean? Over time, there have been many, seemingly interchangeable labels alluding to fair treatment of the planet and people. Product attributes were referred to as *ecological*, with consumers now preferring *natural* above all (Bain & Company, 2024). Sustainability has become a widely used buzzword, often used liberally, ignoring its three faceted dimensions, namely environmental, social and economic. Environmental sustainability advertising is made up of green and ecological advertising, covering a scope that reaches beyond messaging defined by its colour, tying in the complete environmental impact of the products, operations and waste incurred as a result (Sander et al, 2011). Sustainable attributes and environmental, social and governance-claims have become a crucial part in the product offering, as half of global consumers report sustainability in their top four considerations for purchasing (Bain & Company, 2024). However, recent economic instability, a rise in inflation and the increasing cost of groceries has caused consumers to list this as a major concern, forcing the priority of sustainability further down the list. Nevertheless, the PWC 2024 Voice of the Consumer Survey found that 43% of people report making an active effort to reduce consumption, with 9.7% willing to pay a premium for sustainable offerings, while the effects of climate change are experienced by 85% in their daily lives, actualising the effects brought on by many decades of negligence.

However, while certain consumers seem willing to invest in sustainable products, trust is needed to secure this relationship. Trust has fallen compared to previous years, as many stakeholders,

including employees and investors, have reported a loss of faith in organisations. Businesses face a critical challenge, as trust is a driver of spending, the foundation of consumer relationships and encourages repeat purchases (PWC, 2024). This decline in trust could be attributed to the affluence of misleading environmental advertising, with greenwashing remaining a prevalent concern within the fashion industry – the act of exaggerating or fabricating sustainability claims. While the oil and gas industry remains at the top of greenwashing incidents, the fashion industry faces much scrutiny as brands promote products as ‘eco-friendly’ and sustainable, exaggerating the minimal use of recycled materials and lacking transparency of their complex supply chains, making source tracing impossible to verify. Fast fashion companies continue to exploit cheap labour practices, at times falling below acceptable working standards, as was the case with Chinese fast fashion giant Shein, with hundreds of factories across China supplying directly to the consumer, managing to keep operations at an arm’s length (Peiyue, 2021). According to an investigation by Rest of World (2021), the workers work inhumane hours, breaking Chinese labour laws. Yet, suppliers talk fondly of the brand, as Shein pays factories on time; a relatively low bar to meet.

Back in the 1990s, Nike became one of the first major brands accused of malpractice, its actions severely impacting the reputation of a previously beloved ‘hero’ brand to this day. The use of sweatshops and child labour across its Asian supply chain broke headlines, and Life magazine (1996) published a picture that would be branded into the mind’s of consumers; a 12-year old boy sewing a Nike football. A snowball reaction occurred, as many popular brands were scrutinised for lack of care, causing groups to take to the streets and demand better treatment (Elliott, 1999). This was a pivotal moment for responsible practices, as consumer power was made apparent and demanded companies be more transparent. Companies were forced to respond and those already taking responsible action needed to actively communicate their efforts (Scheerers, 2001).

### **2.2.1. The Need for Storytelling**

In this sense, storytelling can be used as a powerful tool to reinforce a brand’s commitment to sustainability, aligning with the increasing demand for more responsible and ethical production

practices, along with calls for transparency and a voiced climate consciousness (Neumann et al., 2020). As a result, the importance of authentic storytelling becomes more apparent and remains essential for differentiation, giving brands that truly believe in making a positive impact the upper hand.

To regain consumer trust and make sustainability claims more meaningful, organisations turn to storytelling as a way of connecting to the audience by conveying their brand's core values and mission. This approach engages both rational and emotional pathways by going beyond facts and certifications, creating a deeper sense of meaning that enhances brand image. In turn, addressing the trust deficit resulting from vague and intangible claims often used in sustainable branding.

While Sander et al. (2011) argue that environmental sustainability advertising was introduced as early as the 1970s by Kassarian and Fisk (Kassarian 1971; Fisk 1974), it wasn't until these scandals unfolded that the relevance of communicating responsible practices developed. On the demand side, consumers began incorporating the environmental impact into their purchasing decisions, and sustainability became essential for companies to survive. Companies had no other option but to listen to the people. While not all brands are created equal, with access to the same advertising budgets, innovation has been key in creating garments that embody the future of sustainable design, along with finding unique and novel ways to get the people to listen. Suddenly storytelling was the biggest asset of them all.

In 1987, the Brundtland Report was published by the UN, defining sustainable development and the changes required to reach it (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Yet, authors Evans and Peirson-Smith (2018) highlight how the word 'sustainable' was quickly appropriated in the name of profit, leaving the original meaning and intent of the word far behind (Charter, 2017). On top of this, using 'sustainable' or variations thereof, including 'green' and 'eco-friendly', in promotional content has led to confusion, as further information attributing the reason for this label is omitted. Essentially, a barrier is created for the adoption of sustainable behaviour due to lack of understanding, further enhancing feelings of frustration, lack of trust and mental fatigue (Evans & Peirson-Smith, 2018). On the other hand, excessive information can lead to further confusion and creates tensions on how to make the right decision, also referred to

as the ‘inability to know’ effect (Beck, 1989; Bly et al., 2015). As a result, the literature suggests that brands should incorporate a balanced approach merging facts with an engaging narrative, ensuring a structured strategy that emphasises cohesiveness across communications (Evans & Peirson-Smith, 2018; Rathee & Milfeld, 2024). After all, consumers shouldn’t, and *don’t want to*, go searching for the information they need. Instead, information should be packaged up neatly and delivered in a compelling, digestible format.

### **2.2.2. The Future of Sustainable Storytelling**

While heritage storytelling draws strength from the past, reinforcing credibility through longevity and tradition, sustainability messaging relies on the future, appealing to consumers’ aspirations for a more responsible and ethical future (Roth-Cohen et al., 2024). A major barrier within the sustainable fashion industry is the price sacrifice associated with many garments, which requires a conscious shift of behaviour toward more ethical and sustainable consumption choices (Kapoor et al., 2024). While heritage storytelling builds trust through the depth of the brand’s history, sustainability storytelling focuses on the brand’s ongoing commitment to its mission. Combining these two narratives creates an opportunity to examine whether heritage-based storytelling can enhance consumer trust for sustainable brands, particularly when mediated by perceived authenticity, perceived brand value, and emotional connection. Understanding how different types of heritage storytelling (brand vs product) can support or amplify sustainable messaging could offer valuable insights into its role in fostering ethical consumption and long-term brand loyalty.

Although both storytelling approaches contribute to consumer engagement in separate ways, recent studies indicate that product-based storytelling is more effective at increasing purchase intention, whereas brand storytelling is more likely to foster long-term trust and brand equity (Garczarek-Bak et al., 2024; Neumann et al., 2020; van Laer et al., 2019). As the demand for authenticity grows as well as an increased pressure on companies to justify their sustainability claims (McKinsey, 2025), this study adopts a sustainability frame to examine how brand and product narratives shape consumer responses in the fashion industry.

*H1: Product heritage storytelling will have a stronger positive effect on consumer trust and purchase intention compared to brand heritage storytelling.*

### **2.3. The Psychological Impact of Storytelling**

Building upon the discussion of product and brand-heritage storytelling approaches, this section explores the key mediating variables that have been found to impact consumer trust and purchase intention.

#### **2.3.1 Perceived Authenticity**

Authenticity seems to be the key to success in both brand and product storytelling, as consumers value genuine and transparent narratives more than ever (Garczarek-Bak et al., 2024; Roth-Cohen et al., 2024). Emphasising the heritage of a brand can naturally signal authenticity by securing the brand's identity in its past history, core values, longevity, and consistent performance (Rose et al., 2016). This historical grounding can convey a sense of stability and reliability, making it easier for consumers to trust the brand's claims (Aimé, 2023; Rose et al., 2016).

Similarly, focusing on product heritage could enhance perceived authenticity. Instead of focusing on the history of the whole brand, product heritage storytelling hones in on the details, including the specific origins, craftsmanship, unique features, or traditional production processes associated with a particular product, highlighting the product's genuineness and tangible value (Garczarek-Bak et al., 2024). For instance, stories that highlight the intricacies of a particular production process or narratives surrounding the use of high-quality ingredients.

Perceived authenticity is found to be a significant driver of consumer trust (Garczarek-Bak et al., 2024). When consumers perceive a brand or a product's history as genuine, they are more likely to develop trust. This could, in turn, fosters brand attachment, commitment, and ultimately increases purchase intentions (Rose et al., 2016). Linking back to the discourse surrounding sustainability messaging, authenticity precedes credibility, as consumers seek transparency that reflects an organisation's claims (Neumann et al., 2020). When sustainability claims are

perceived as authentic, consumers are more likely to trust the brand and feel confident in their purchasing decisions. This leads us to our second hypothesis.

*H2a: Perceived authenticity will mediate the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention.*

### **2.3.2. Perceived Brand Value**

Brand storytelling shapes consumer perceptions of brand value by reinforcing meaningful attributes such as quality, exclusivity, and social responsibility. Product-focused storytelling enhances perceived brand value by highlighting craftsmanship, materials, and functional benefits of specific items, making them appear premium and unique (Aimé, 2023). Brand-focused storytelling, on the other hand, emphasises the company's heritage, values, and overarching philosophy, which contributes to a broader sense of prestige, consistency, and trustworthiness (Kapoor et al., 2024).

Consumers assign higher value to brands that successfully integrate storytelling with tangible actions, such as certifications, ethical sourcing, and social responsibility initiatives (Neumann et al., 2020). The more a story aligns with the brand's actual practices, the greater the perceived value, positively influencing trust and purchase intention (von Wallpach et al., 2017).

*H2b: Perceived brand value will mediate the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention.*

### **2.3.3. Emotional Connection**

Emotional connection plays a pivotal role in how consumers respond to brand storytelling, particularly in contexts where values and identity are at stake, such as sustainable fashion (Luchs & Kumar, 2017; Neumann et al., 2020). Heritage-based narratives often tap into emotions like nostalgia, pride, and belonging by conveying a sense of continuity and tradition (Woodside, 2010; Rose et al., 2016). These affective responses contribute to the development of a self-brand connection, as consumers tend to form attachments to brands that evoke strong feelings (Barney

& Jones, 2023). Contrary to involvement, which relies on rational processing, emotional connections are naturally governed by emotions, which can make a brand seem irreplaceable for no reason other than pure sentiment (Thomson et al., 2005). In brand-level storytelling, this connection is cultivated through shared values and mission, while product-level storytelling fosters emotional engagement by highlighting quality, care and uniqueness embedded in the product itself. Emotional resonance not only amplifies the impact of a message but also strengthens trust and deepens consumer commitment, factors that are critical in driving purchase intention within the ethical and emotional context of sustainability (Gosline et al., 2017; Kapoor et al., 2024). As such, emotional connection is a vital mediating mechanism through which storytelling can translate into meaningful consumer-brand relationships and sustainable purchasing behaviour.

*H2c: Emotional connection will mediate the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention.*

## **2.4. Impact on Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention**

Trust is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as a “firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something”. Both heritage and sustainability narratives contribute to consumer trust, a critical factor in purchasing behaviour. Trust is built when consumers perceive a brand's messaging as authentic, consistent, and aligned with its values (Aimé, 2023). Perceived authenticity, perceived brand value, and emotional connection serve as mediators, enhancing the relationship between storytelling and trust. When consumers trust a brand, influencer, or online platform, they are more likely to develop a positive attitude toward the product or service, which in turn leads to a greater intention to purchase (Yoon, 2002), especially in industries where credibility and ethical considerations play a crucial role (Neumann et al., 2020).

## **2.5. The Role of Narrative Transportation in Storytelling**

Narrative transportation refers to the degree to which a consumer is cognitively and emotionally immersed in a story, leading to a shift in focus from analytical processing to narrative processing (Garczarek-Bak et al., 2024; Green & Brock, 2000). Research suggests that when consumers are transported by a story (which can be about brand or product heritage), they experience stronger

emotions, which in turn can influence their behavioural intentions, including purchase and recommendation (Kang et al., 2020). When consumers experience high levels of narrative transportation in advertising content, they seem to be more likely to trust the brand and be persuaded by its message (van Laer et al, 2019). Research further suggests that user-generated narratives and highly engaging digital storytelling formats enhance transportation effects, making stories more persuasive (Holt, 2016).

Van Laer et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis identifying three critical elements that shape narrative transportation in digital storytelling: the story domain, which differentiates between commercial and non-commercial storytelling and its impact on persuasion, with commercial narratives benefiting more from immersive storytelling; the story source, which compares user-generated and brand-generated content, showing that user-generated narratives tend to enhance trust; and narrative detail and emotional appeal, where more vivid and engaging narratives increase transportation and help mitigate scepticism. Building on the existing research, we test whether high narrative transportation enhances the impact of brand heritage and product heritage storytelling on trust and purchase intention.

*H3: Narrative transportation (high vs low) will moderate the effect of storytelling type on consumer trust and purchase intention, such that higher transportation will strengthen the effects.*

By examining the mediating effects of perceived authenticity, perceived brand value, and emotional connection, alongside the moderating role of narrative transportation, this study aims to provide deeper insights into how storytelling shapes consumer trust and purchase intention. Understanding these psychological mechanisms and individual differences will offer valuable strategic implications for brands looking to leverage storytelling to drive consumer engagement and ethical purchasing behaviour. These psychological responses are further shaped by theoretical mechanisms, which are outlined in the following section.

## **2.6. Theoretical Foundations of Storytelling in Consumer Behaviour**

The effects of storytelling on consumer behaviour, in particular consumer trust and purchase intention, can be better understood through the lens of foundational consumer behaviour theories.

Each of these frameworks present further explanation as to why storytelling works. When considered as a whole, they create a fundamental understanding of how storytelling shapes perceptions, and what makes certain narratives more impactful in the context of sustainable fashion.

Firstly, the impact of brand storytelling on consumer trust and purchase intention is supported by several well-established theories in consumer behaviour and marketing. Self-Concept Theory (Sirgy, 1982) suggests that consumers choose brands that align with their self-identity, making storytelling a crucial tool in reinforcing personal values and self-expression. In the context of sustainability, consumers may gravitate toward brands whose narratives reflect their environmental or ethical beliefs, strengthening the emotional bond between the consumer and brand.

Additionally, Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973) explains how consumers use brands to communicate their values, status, and uniqueness to others. Wearing and consuming sustainable products, along with exposure to heritage-based storytelling, both serve as external signals used to reinforce a social identity.

Furthermore, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) explains how consumers process brand messages. Consumers more actively engaged with sustainability efforts may be more likely to use central processing, where they deeply evaluate the sustainability claims separate from the emotional narrative, while others may rely on subtle cues such as endorsements or the aesthetics of the story.

Brand Equity Theory (Aaker, 1991) further supports the idea that storytelling reinforces brand differentiation and loyalty through perceived quality, authenticity, and emotional attachment. When a brand's narrative is consistent and engaging, it builds long-term equity and reinforces trust among consumers.

Finally, Consumer-Brand Identification Theory (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) suggests that consumers develop strong connections with brands that share their values, particularly relevant in sustainability storytelling. By aligning with a brand's mission, whether through brand heritage

or product attributes, consumers experience a deeper psychological connection, increasing trust and likelihood of purchase.

As a whole, these theoretical foundations provide a solid base for understanding how consumers choose to trust brands, especially valuable for brands looking to nurture customer relationships and build long-term loyalty. They also help explain how brand narratives, perceived authenticity, perceived brand value and emotional connection may influence trust and purchase intention.

While existing research has identified the core psychological mechanisms behind effective storytelling, few studies have explored the effect of brand versus product storytelling in the sustainable fashion industry. The following chapter outlines the research design used to address this gap and test the proposed hypotheses.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Aims and Objectives**

The primary aim of this research is to explore the impact of heritage-based sustainability storytelling on consumer trust and purchase intention, with a focus on the role of perceived authenticity, perceived brand value, and emotional connection as mediators. Additionally, the study will examine how narrative transportation moderates this relationship.

##### **3.1.1. Specific Objectives:**

1. To compare the effects of product heritage storytelling and brand heritage storytelling on consumer trust and purchase intention.
2. To investigate the mediating roles of perceived authenticity, perceived brand value, and emotional connection in shaping consumer responses.
3. To assess whether narrative transportation moderates the relationship between storytelling approach and consumer trust/purchase intention.
4. To provide strategic recommendations for emerging and niche sustainable brands on optimizing storytelling for market differentiation and consumer engagement.

Once the objectives of the study were defined, research questions were developed to reflect the gaps discussed in the literature. Storytelling has been a powerful tool within marketing for decades, as it has the ability to prompt a psychological response from the viewer, influencing their perception and relationship with a brand in consequence. While the literature discusses storytelling within sustainable marketing as a whole, there has been a lack of distinction between types of storytelling, such as brand or product narrative, and comparing the effects of these. Further, variables such as perceived authenticity, perceived brand value and emotional connection have been studied separately, but their combined role in the mediation of sustainable storytelling contexts remains underexplored. Lastly, the true power of narrative transportation seems to offer great promise in this context, but has yet to be examined.

### 3.1.2. Research Questions

1. How does product heritage storytelling influence consumer trust and purchase intention compared to brand heritage storytelling?
2. To what extent do perceived authenticity, perceived brand value, and emotional connection mediate the relationship between heritage storytelling and consumer trust and purchase intention?
3. Does narrative transportation moderate the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention?

### 3.1.3. Hypotheses

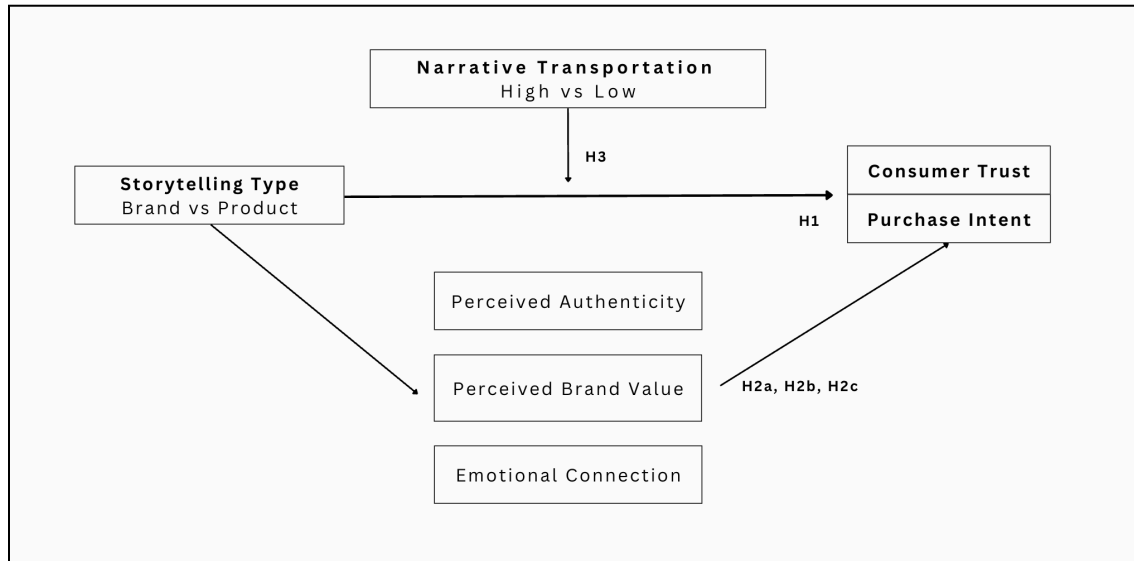
Derived from the literature review and research questions, the hypotheses are as follows:

1. **H1:** Product heritage storytelling will have a stronger positive effect on consumer trust and purchase intention compared to brand heritage storytelling.
2. **H2a:** Perceived authenticity will mediate the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention.
3. **H2b:** Perceived brand value will mediate the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention.
4. **H2c:** Emotional connection will mediate the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention.
5. **H3:** Narrative transportation (high vs. low) will moderate the effect of storytelling type on consumer trust and purchase intention, such that higher transportation will strengthen the effects.

## 3.2. Conceptual Framework

The following conceptual framework (Figure 1) visualises these hypotheses, outlining the proposed mediating and moderating relationships.

**Figure 1.** *Proposed Conceptual Framework Examining the Effects of Storytelling Type on Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention, with Mediation and Moderation Effects*



### 3.3. Research Design

Following a comprehensive literature review, this study adopts a quantitative experimental research design to investigate the impact of storytelling type on consumer trust and purchase intention, with narrative transportation tested as a moderating variable and perceived authenticity, perceived brand value, and emotional connection as mediating variables. The research uses a between-subjects experimental design, where participants are exposed to different storytelling conditions and their responses measured through validated survey instruments.

#### 3.3.1. Pre-Survey Interviews

While the company chosen for the experimental research was loosely based on an existing sustainable brand called Clòimh, a fictional brand was created to eliminate any possibility of participants having prior knowledge of the brand. After careful consideration and multiple rounds of brainstorming with generative AI, two options remained: Arden & Co, a luxury wool brand with a rich heritage, or Olann, a direct homage to the Irish (Gaeilge) word for wool, a direct inspiration from Clòimh, the Scottish equivalent (also meaning 'wool'). It should be noted

that Olann was found to be linked to an existing company. However, as the Canadian online-only store caters to a very niche audience, standing at a premium price point, the name remained a realistic contender. To assess fit and preference, along with testing whether the name Olann was already known, two semi-structured interviews were conducted to support the decision. Both participants showed a clear preference for Olann without being aware of its existence, referring to a certain warmth and comfort that it provides. One participant described Olann as evoking a sense of minimalism and softness, while the other mentioned a feeling of naturalness and sleekness, often associated with Scandinavian design. Once informed about the nature of the company, both participants showed a clear preference for Olann, one stating that it felt more artisanal and culturally rooted, viewing Arden & Co as more modern and commercial. Overall, although both names were well-received, *Olann* was found to be more effective at conveying a sense of heritage, sustainability, and authenticity, key dimensions explored in this research.

### **3.3.2. Sample and Data Collection**

A convenience sampling method was used, primarily recruiting participants via social media platforms and through various online networks. The expected sample size was at least 200 respondents, which was reached to ensure sufficient statistical relevance to measure effects across conditions. Data was collected through a structured online survey using the Qualtrics Experience Management Software.

### **3.3.3. Experimental Conditions**

To examine the effects of story type and narrative intensity on consumer perceptions of a sustainable fashion brand – now established as Olann – the study consisted of five experimental conditions manipulated by type of storytelling (Product or Brand) and degree of narrative intensity (High or Low), namely: Product - High, Product - Low, Brand - High, Brand - Low, and a control group. Participants (N = 214) were randomly assigned to one of the five conditions. Each participant received a stimulus consisting of a brand narrative text and an accompanying image, followed by a product photo presented consistently across all conditions to provide a realistic touch to the brand and make questions that follow easier to respond to (see Appendix A).

The independent variable (IV) is the type of storytelling: either brand storytelling, which focuses on the brand's heritage, values, and company philosophy, or product storytelling, which centres around craftsmanship, materials, and specific attributes of the garment. The second factor is the narrative transportation level, manipulated by the emotional tone and descriptive depth of the story. In high transportation conditions, narratives are immersive, emotionally engaging, and rich in sensory detail. In low transportation conditions, narratives are written in a factual, neutral tone with minimal imagery.

Each narrative will be accompanied by a corresponding image: either a highly immersive photo (high transportation) or a minimalistic image (low transportation). The narratives and visuals were presented first, followed by a questionnaire measuring perceived authenticity, perceived brand value, emotional connection, consumer trust, purchase intention, and narrative transportation. Three additional scales measuring self-identity, perceived sustainability, and sustainability habits were added to allow for exploratory analyses.

#### **3.3.4. Measurement Instruments**

All key variables in the survey were measured based on existing validated instruments. Consumer Trust was measured using the scale developed by Morgan and Hunt (1994), while purchase intention was assessed using the scale from Dodds et al. (1991). Perceived authenticity was evaluated based on the scale proposed by Napoli et al. (2014), and perceived brand value was measured using items from Sweeney and Soutar (2001). Emotional connection was captured through the scale developed by Thomson et al. (2005). Finally, narrative transportation was measured using the scale by Green and Brock (2000). Self-identity and sustainability habits were measured using items adapted from prior work on self-brand connection (Escalas & Bettman, 2003), consumer-brand identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Lam et al., 2013), and symbolic consumption theory (Belk, 1988). Yet, it should be noted that items were tailored to suit the context of sustainable fashion and storytelling narratives.

### 3.3.5. Pre-test

A survey pre-test was sent to 15 participants to evaluate the effectiveness of each measurement scale and gather individual feedback on the overall survey experience. Each construct underwent exploratory factor analyses and reliability tests (Cronbach's alpha) to measure and improve scale efficiency. Based on feedback, factor loadings and theoretical clarity, the best-performing items were kept while retaining internal consistency, which they all did ( $\alpha > 0.88$ ). The scales were adapted to fit the specific context of the study in response to said feedback, namely fine-tuning wording so as to reach a suitable tone for the effects being measured while avoiding the repetition of similar sounding items. This overlap was flagged by multiple participants, who reported confusion, namely within the perceived authenticity scale. Originally, several items conveyed very similar meanings. As a result, the weakest item was removed, namely "this message felt genuine", which closely overlapped with stronger statements such as "communicates in a sincere way" and "honest about values." The remaining items were then changed to cover a broader perception of authenticity within the brand, including references to product quality and brand heritage, such as highlighting the brand's roots and traditions that are "still celebrated today" to match the emotional narrative. This approach was applied to all of the scales in varying degrees, though perceived authenticity underwent the most substantial change from its original form, which is reflected in the reliability checks. While the removal of the weakest item would typically maintain a high Cronbach's alpha, the desire to encompass a broader sense of authenticity was at the cost of internal consistency. Nevertheless, the scale was retained for the study as it was believed to appropriately capture the construct sought to be examined.

Further, the perceived brand value scale was refined to focus specifically on product quality, adhering to a distinct branch of Sweeney's framework, while the self-identity scale was improved by removing one item ("Clothing choices reflect who I am"), which addressed concerns about overlap and somewhat improved internal consistency. The perceived sustainability scale, designed to assess participants' evaluations of the brand's commitment to environmental and ethical practices, showed excellent reliability ( $\alpha = .96$ ) and was kept in its entirety. Similarly, the sustainable habits scale was maintained in its original attitudinal format,

as the study aimed to capture participants' perceptions and intentions rather than measure past behaviours. Finally, purchase intention was assessed using a concise three-item scale adapted from Putrevu and Lord (1994), as successfully applied by Napoli et al. (2014), ensuring predictive validity consistent with prior research.

## **4. Data Analyses and Results**

### **4.1. Data Analysis**

The study used Hayes PROCESS Macro modeling (Model 4) to examine the mediating effects of perceived authenticity, perceived brand value, and emotional connection on consumer trust and purchase intention. Additionally, Model 1 was used to test whether narrative transportation moderated the relationship between storytelling type and the dependent variables. To further explore these effects, ANOVAs and ANCOVAs were conducted to assess the combined and conditional effects of storytelling condition, narrative intensity, and individual difference variables such as self-identity and sustainability habits. Each significant ANOVA or ANCOVA output was followed with a Tukey post hoc test to explore the differences across groups in detail, simultaneously adjusting for multiple comparisons, controlling the familywise error rate of returning false positives and ensuring results remain accurate despite running multiple tests. Follow-up regression analyses were used to investigate condition-specific relationships. Descriptive statistics, new reliability tests (Cronbach's Alpha), and manipulation checks were used to ensure data validity and robustness. Contrary to the pre-test, the reliability tests following the final survey revealed slightly lower values. Notably, as briefly aforementioned, the perceived authenticity (AUTH) scale fell below the generally acceptable threshold of  $\alpha > .70$ . However, all items demonstrated acceptable corrected item-total correlations (ranging from .310 to .520), indicating that each item contributes meaningfully to the overall construct. Removing any single item was not found to improve reliability. Given the theoretical relevance of authenticity in this study and the exploratory nature of the research, the full scale was retained for subsequent analyses.

**Table 1.** Reliability of Measurement Scales Used in the Study (Cronbach's Alpha)

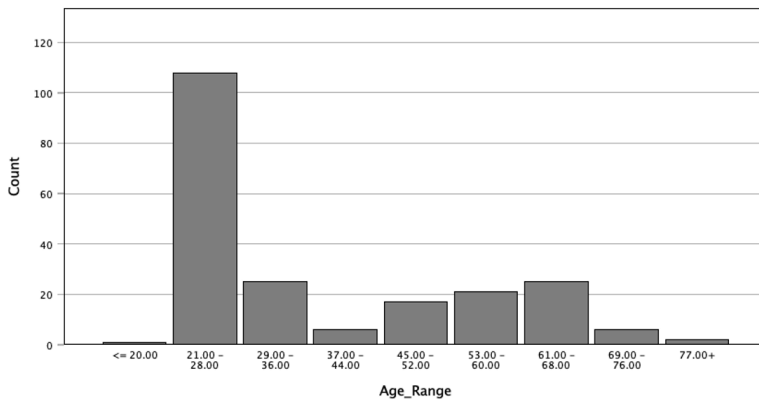
Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
AUTH	0.635	4
PBV	0.730	4
EMO	0.716	4
TRUST	0.787	3
PI	0.789	3
NT	0.776	4
SELF_ID	0.798	4
SUSperc	0.850	4
SUShab	0.825	4

## 4.2. Sample Characterisation

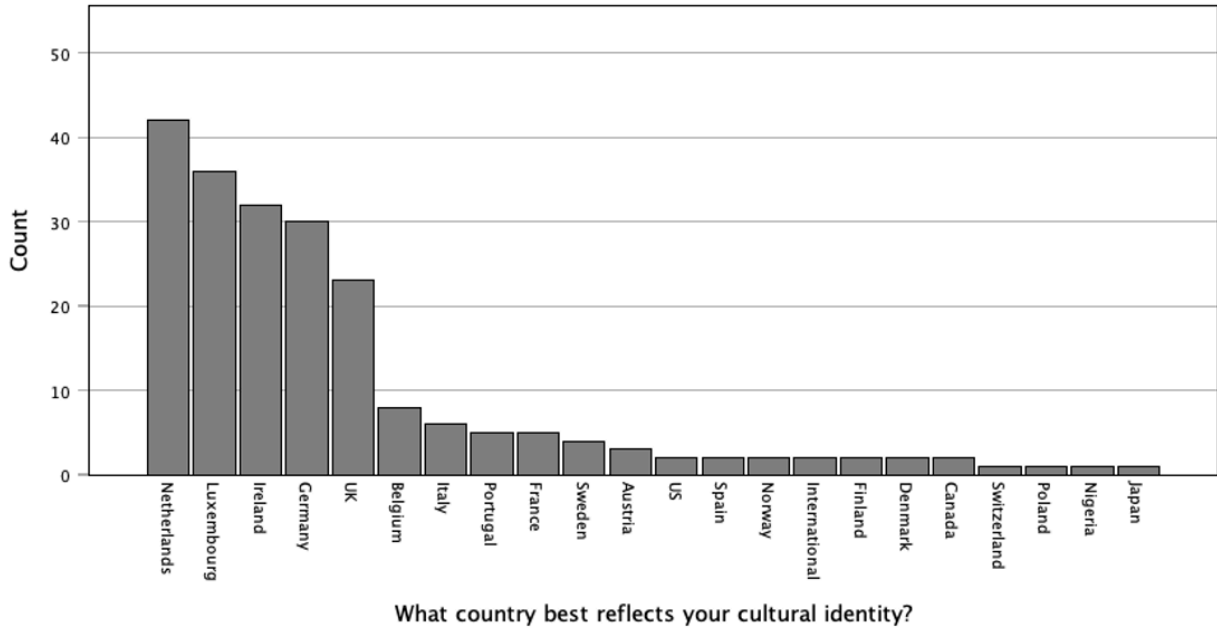
The final sample consisted of 214 participants. The majority were female (62.6%), followed by male (36.4%) and other (1%). Most respondents (51.8%) were aged between 21 and 28 years, followed by the age ranges 29–36 and 61–68, each comprising 11.85% of the sample.

In terms of education, the majority held a Bachelor's degree (39.7%) or Master's degree (35.0%). Participants were culturally diverse, yet mostly European, with the largest groups identifying with the Netherlands (19.6%), Luxembourg (15.9%), Ireland (15.0%), and Germany (14.0%).

**Figure 2.** Bar chart of participants' age range.



**Figure 3.** Simple bar chart of geographical affiliation of participants.



### 4.3. Preliminary Analyses

Before testing the main hypotheses in this research, a series of preliminary analyses were conducted to examine whether the manipulations had a general effect on the dependent variables. A significant multivariate effect was identified through Roy's largest root in a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), namely  $F(20, 774) = 1.851, p = .012$ . Based on these findings, a series of one-way ANOVAs and mediation analyses were conducted to establish a baseline understanding prior to the main hypothesis testing.

**Table 2.** *Storytelling Condition Significantly Affects Perceived Authenticity, Trust, and Narrative Transportation.*

Variable	F(df)	p-value	$\eta^2$	Significant?
AUTH	F(4, 209) = 4.15	.003	.073	Yes
PBV	F(4, 209) = 0.561	.691	.011	No
EMO	F(4, 209) = 0.915	.456	.017	No
TRUST	F(4, 209) = 2.899	.023	.053	Yes
PI	F(4, 209) = 0.952	.435	.018	No
NT	F(4, 209) = 6.214	< .001	.106	Yes

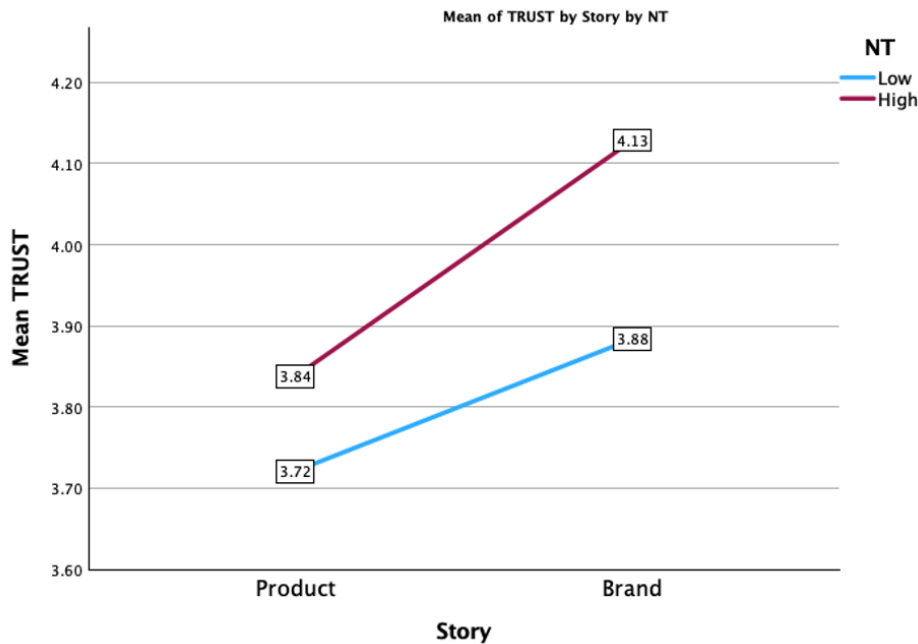
ANOVA results revealed that the storytelling condition significantly affected perceived authenticity (see Table 2). Levene’s test for homogeneity of variances was not significant ( $p = .369$ ), indicating that the assumption of equal variances was met and that Tukey’s HSD post hoc test could be applied. Post hoc comparisons showed that participants in the Brand – High condition ( $M = 4.48$ ) rated authenticity (AUTH) significantly higher than those in the control condition ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $p = .021$ ). Product – High ( $M = 4.29$ ) also scored higher than Brand – Low ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $p = .002$ ). No other comparisons were significant.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of storytelling condition on perceived brand value (PBV). The results revealed no statistically significant differences in brand value across the five experimental conditions, with a very small effect size (see Table 1).

The analysis was repeated to test whether there was a significant effect on participant’s emotional connection (EMO) with the brand, which similarly revealed no statistically significant differences between the five experimental groups.

Next, a significant effect was found for Trust (see Table 2). Notably, consumer trust is measured significantly higher in the Brand – High condition ( $M = 4.13$ ) than both in the control ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $p = .027$ ) and Product – Low ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $p = .035$ ). However, there were no significant differences across conditions in purchase intention (PI).

**Figure 4.** Mean of Trust per Storytelling Condition.



Further, the manipulation of narrative transportation (NT) was reportedly effective, as scores varied significantly by condition. Post hoc comparisons revealed that the Brand – High condition ( $M = 4.25$ ) produced significantly greater transportation than both the control ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $p = .002$ ) and Product – Low conditions ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

A Chi-square test of independence was used to check whether participants correctly identified the story focus according to their condition. The response categories were collapsed into Product, Brand, and Other/Unclear, showing a statistically significant result,  $\chi^2(4, N = 214) = 31.53$ ,  $p < .001$ , indicating that participants in the brand and product storytelling conditions were more likely to correctly identify the intended story focus. Specifically, 63% of participants in the Brand condition selected “the brand’s identity” as the focus, while 60% of participants in the Product condition selected “the product — including its materials, design, and craftsmanship.” It should be noted that one cell (11.1%) had an expected count below 5, which was accepted given the sample size and strengthens the robustness of the result. These results further confirm the effectiveness of the story focus manipulation.

**Table 3.** *Story Manipulation Check.*

Condition	Identified as Product	Identified as Brand	Other/Unclear	Total (%)
Product	63.3%	27.8%	8.9%	100%
Brand	31.7%	59.8%	8.5%	100%
Control	19.0%	71.4%	9.5%	100%

While separate from the main focus of the research, the participant's perceived sustainability of the brand was also measured, which showed a significant effect of the condition. Both Brand storytelling conditions (Brand – Low ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $p = .023$ ) and Brand – High ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $p = .035$ )) yielded significantly higher sustainability ratings than the control condition ( $M = 4.04$ ). The effectiveness of the survey manipulation was further confirmed by a chi-square test,  $\chi^2(6, N = 214) = 31.71$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.** *Perceived Sustainability Ratings Significantly Differ by Storytelling Condition*

Variable	F(df)	p-value	$\eta^2$	Significant?
SUSperc	$F(4, 209) = 3.697$	.006	.066	Yes

#### 4.4. Main Hypothesis Testing

After gathering an insight of general differences between conditions and ensuring the successful manipulation for each of the different scenarios, the hypotheses tests were conducted to test the impact of storytelling type on the dependent variables: AUTH, PBV, EMO, TRUST and PI, where NT was tested as a moderator within this relationship. Additionally, self-identity (Self\_ID) and perceived sustainability (SUSperc) were measured.

*H1: Product heritage storytelling will have a stronger positive effect on consumer trust and purchase intention compared to brand heritage storytelling.*

To test H1, a one-way ANOVA comparing only the brand vs product conditions (omitting the control condition) was run. For consumer trust, the analysis revealed a statistically significant

difference between the two groups,  $F(1, 170) = 5.495, p = .020$ , with a small to moderate effect size ( $\eta^2 = .031$ ). Mean scores showed that participants exposed to brand storytelling ( $M = 4.00, SD = 0.68$ ) reported higher levels of trust than those exposed to product storytelling ( $M = 3.78, SD = 0.58$ ).

For purchase intention, no significant effect was found between the groups,  $F(1, 170) = 0.45, p = .720, \eta^2 = .003$ . Thus, contrary to the hypothesis, brand storytelling was found to have a stronger positive effect on consumer trust than product storytelling, leading us to reject H1, with purchase intention showing no significant difference.

*H2a: Perceived authenticity will mediate the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention.*

To test H2a, a mediation analysis using Hayes PROCESS Model 4 was conducted with story type (brand vs product) as the independent variable, AUTH as the mediator, and TRUST as the dependent variable. The total effect of story type on perceived trust was significant. However, the direct effect was not significant, suggesting that the relationship is fully mediated. The indirect effect through authenticity was statistically significant, supporting H2a. The same pattern was found for purchase intention, as the total effect of storytelling type on purchase intention was not significant, but the indirect effect via authenticity was statistically significant.

**Table 5.** *Mediation Analysis of Perceived Authenticity on the Relationship Between Story Type and Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention*

Outcome	Path	B	SE	t	p-value	95% CI
Trust	Total effect (c)	0.2273	0.0970	2.3442	.0202	[0.0359, 0.4187]
Trust	Story → AUTH (a)	0.1995	0.0848	2.3533	.0198	[0.0322, 0.3669]
Trust	AUTH → Trust (b)	0.5167	0.0785	6.5842	< .001	[0.3618, 0.6716]
Trust	Direct effect (c')	0.1242	0.0882	1.4088	.1607	[-0.0498, 0.2982]
Trust	Indirect effect (a × b)	0.1031	0.0453	—	.0202	[0.0167, 0.1972]
PI	Total effect (c)	0.0052	0.1002	0.0523	.9584	[-0.1925, 0.2030]
PI	Story → AUTH (a)	0.1995	0.0848	2.3533	.0198	[0.0322, 0.3669]
PI	AUTH → PI (b)	0.4634	0.0836	5.5421	< .001	[0.2983, 0.6284]
PI	Direct effect (c')	-0.0872	0.0939	-0.9286	.3544	[-0.2726, 0.0982]
PI	Indirect effect (a × b)	0.0925	0.0371	—	.0202	[0.0202, 0.1660]

*H2b: Perceived brand value will mediate the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention.*

For trust, the storytelling condition did not significantly predict PBV, although PBV significantly predicted trust. The indirect effect of storytelling on trust via PBV was not significant, indicating no mediation.

Similarly, for purchase intention, PBV again emerged as a significant predictor, but the effect of storytelling on PBV was not significant. The indirect effect of storytelling on purchase intention through PBV was also non-significant.

As both indirect effects include zero in the confidence intervals, the results do not support H2b. These findings suggest that perceived brand value does not mediate the effect of storytelling condition on either consumer trust or purchase intention.

**Table 6.** Mediation Analysis of Perceived Brand Value on the Relationship Between Story Type and Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention

Outcome	Path	B	SE	t	p-value	95% CI
Trust	Story → PBV (a)	-0.0218	0.0863	-0.2529	.8007	[-0.1921, 0.1485]
Trust	PBV → Trust (b)	0.5964	0.0733	8.1409	< .001	[0.4518, 0.7411]
Trust	Direct effect (c')	0.2403	0.0824	2.9151	.0040	[0.0776, 0.4030]
Trust	Total effect (c)	0.2273	0.0970	2.3442	.0202	[0.0359, 0.4187]
Trust	Indirect effect (a × b)	-0.0130	0.0508	—	.8007	[-0.1117, 0.0853]
PI	PBV → PI (b)	0.5563	0.0784	7.0955	< .001	[0.4015, 0.7111]
PI	Direct effect (c')	0.0174	0.0882	0.1970	.8441	[-0.1568, 0.1915]
PI	Total effect (c)	0.0052	0.1002	0.0523	.9584	[-0.1925, 0.2030]
PI	Indirect effect (a × b)	-0.0121	0.0480	—	.8007	[-0.1065, 0.0835]

*H2c: Emotional connection will mediate the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention.*

For H2c, emotional connection was found to significantly predict both trust and purchase intention. However, storytelling condition was not found to significantly predict emotional connection. The indirect effects of storytelling on both trust and purchase intention through emotional connection were non-significant, as the confidence intervals include zero, leading us to reject H2c.

**Table 7.** *Mediation Analysis of Emotional Connection on the Relationship Between Story Type and Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention*

Outcome	Path	B	SE	p-value	95% CI
Trust	Story → EMO (a)	0.1736	0.1116	.1216	[-0.0466, 0.3939]
Trust	EMO → Trust (b)	0.3960	0.0595	< .001	[0.2785, 0.5134]
Trust	Indirect effect (a × b)	0.0688	0.0441	.1585	[-0.0143, 0.1585]
Trust	Direct effect (c')	0.1585	0.0872	.0707	[-0.0136, 0.3306]
PI	EMO → PI (b)	0.4547	0.0595	< .001	[0.3371, 0.5722]
PI	Indirect effect (a × b)	0.0790	0.0503	.1780	[-0.0231, 0.1780]
PI	Direct effect (c')	-0.0737	0.0873	.3994	[-0.2460, 0.0985]

*H3: Narrative transportation (high vs low) will moderate the effect of storytelling type on consumer trust and purchase intention, such that higher transportation will strengthen the effects.*

To test H3, a moderation analysis was conducted using Hayes PROCESS Model 1 to examine whether narrative transportation moderated the relationship between storytelling type (brand vs product) and consumer trust, which was deemed not statistically significant. While narrative transportation significantly predicted trust, the main effect of storytelling type did not reach significance in this model.

The same pattern was found for purchase intention, as the interaction effect was not statistically significant, and neither the main effect of storytelling type nor the interaction term reached significance. Therefore, H3 was not supported for either consumer trust or purchase intention.

**Table 8.** Moderation Analysis of Narrative Intensity on the Relationship Between Story Type and Consumer Trust and Purchase Intention

Outcome	Predictor	B	SE	t	p-value	95% CI
Trust	Story	0.0466	0.0814	-0.1137	.5788	[-0.1187, 0.2118]
Trust	NT	0.5303	0.0657	8.6753	< .001	[0.4096, 0.6510]
Trust	Story × NT	0.1396	0.1217	1.1467	.2531	[-0.1007, 0.3798]
PI	Story	-0.1576	0.0909	-1.7344	.0847	[-0.3370, 0.0218]
PI	NT	0.4798	0.0664	7.2319	< .001	[0.3489, 0.6108]
PI	Story × NT	0.1690	0.1321	1.2793	.2025	[-0.0918, 0.4298]

Note: Coefficients are based on PROCESS Model 1. NT and Story were mean-centered prior to analysis.

**Table 9.** *Summary of Supported Hypotheses.*

<b>Hypotheses</b>	<b>Supported?</b>	<b>Notes</b>
H1: <i>Product heritage storytelling will have a stronger positive effect on consumer trust and purchase intention compared to brand heritage storytelling.</i>	Rejected	Brand storytelling led to higher trust. No significant effect on purchase intention. Opposite found from what was predicted.
H2a: <i>Perceived authenticity mediates the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention.</i>	Accepted	Significant indirect effect through authenticity for both trust and purchase intention. Full mediation.
H2b: <i>Perceived brand value mediates the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention.</i>	Rejected	PBV predicted outcomes, but storytelling type did not significantly affect PBV. No mediation.
H2c: <i>Emotional connection mediates the relationship between storytelling type and consumer trust/purchase intention.</i>	Rejected	Emotional connection was a significant predictor, but was not influenced by storytelling type. No mediation.
H3: <i>Narrative transportation (high vs low) moderates the effect of storytelling type on trust and purchase intention.</i>	Rejected	No significant interaction effect. Narrative intensity predicted trust independently, but did not moderate the main relationship.

#### 4.5. Further Analyses

Based on the findings so far, further analyses were conducted as exploratory research to examine whether the main and supporting individual variables, when considered together, could account for additional variance in the observed outcomes.

##### 4.5.1. Combined Effects of Story Type and Narrative Intensity on Trust

A  $2 \times 2$  between-subjects ANOVA was conducted of story type (brand vs product) and narrative transportation (high vs low) to investigate their combined effects on consumer trust. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of story type, indicating that participants exposed to brand storytelling ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) reported significantly higher levels of trust than those exposed to product storytelling ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ). There was also a marginally significant main effect of narrative intensity, with high-intensity narratives ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) associated with slightly higher trust than low-intensity narratives ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ). However, the interaction effect between story type and narrative intensity was not significant. These findings support the first hypothesis.

**Table 10.** *Main and Interaction Effects of Story Type and Narrative Intensity on Trust.*

Effect	F(1, 168)	p-value	$\eta^2$	M (SD)
Story Type	5.55	.020	.032	Brand: 4.01 (0.68), Product: 3.78 (0.58)
Narrative Intensity	3.51	.063	.020	High: 3.98 (0.60), Low: 3.80 (0.67)
Story Type $\times$ Narrative Intensity	0.44	.508	—	—

##### 4.5.2. The Role of Perceived Sustainability in Shaping Trust

An ANCOVA was conducted to control for participants' perceived sustainability of the brand (SUSperc) while assessing the impact of storytelling condition on trust. Perceived sustainability was found to have a significant effect on trust, as higher perceived sustainability led to more trust in the brand. However, there was no significant main effect of storytelling condition, nor a

significant interaction between SUSperc and story condition. These results suggest that participants' underlying sustainability attitudes played a more influential role in shaping trust than the narrative condition alone.

**Table 11.** *ANCOVA for Storytelling Condition with SUSperc as Covariate and Moderator.*

Effect	F(df)	p-value
SUSperc (Covariate)	F(9, 185) = 13.66	< .001
Storytelling Condition	F(2, 185) = 0.07	.934
SUSperc × Condition	F(17, 185) = 0.90	.570

Note: The ANCOVA examined the effect of storytelling condition on trust, controlling for perceived sustainability importance (SUSperc).

#### **4.5.3. The Influence of Sustainability Habits on Perceived Sustainability**

Consequently, an ANCOVA was conducted to assess the impact of storytelling condition and participants' reported sustainability habits (SUSHab) on perceived brand sustainability (SUSperc). As previously found during the ANOVA analysis, a significant main effect of storytelling condition was found, indicating once again that some storytelling types were more effective at conveying sustainability. However, no significant effect was found for sustainability habits, and the interaction between story type and SUSHab was also non-significant. This suggests that the sustainability habits of participants themselves did not influence the results of the analysis, rather the storytelling conditions being the primary source shaping the reported sustainability perceptions.

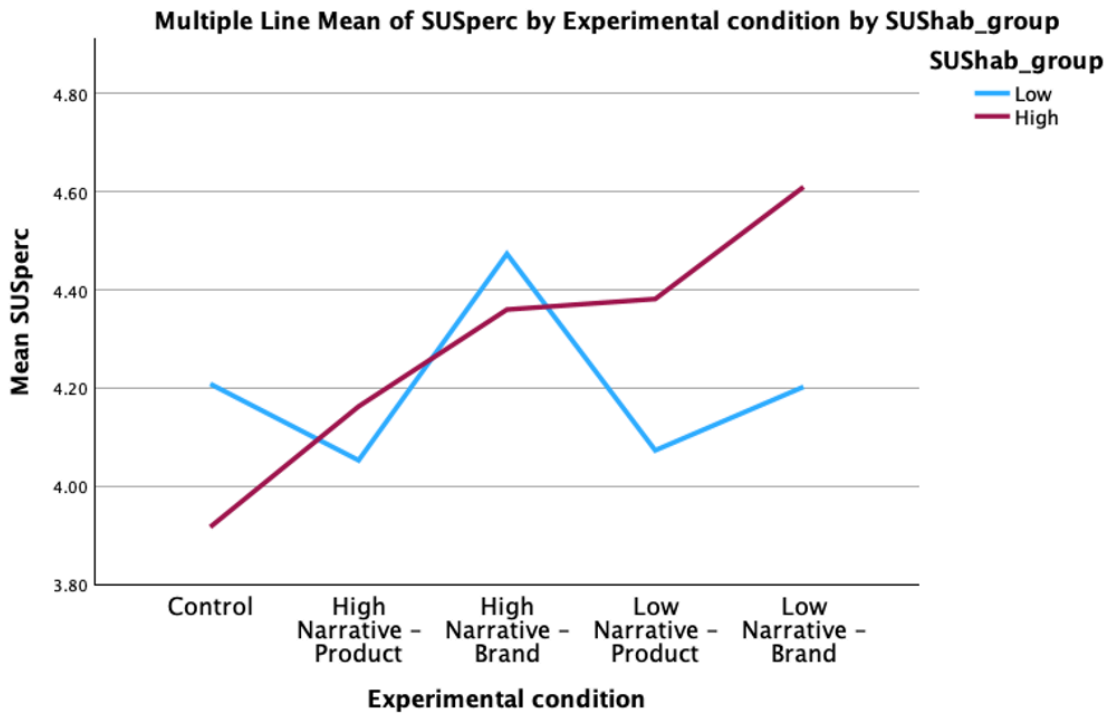
**Table 12.** ANCOVA for Storytelling Condition with SUSHab as Covariate and Moderator.

Effect	F(df)	p-value
Storytelling Condition	F(2, 171) = 3.592	.035
SUSHab (Covariate)	F(15, 171) = 1.171	.339
Story Type × SUSHab	F(25, 171) = 1.390	.115

Note: The ANCOVA assessed whether sustainability perceptions were shaped by story condition or participant sustainability habits (SUSHab).

As shown in the graph below, participants with reportedly high sustainability habits were much less accepting of the control condition, and rated the other conditions more consistently, rating the low narrative brand storytelling condition the highest on sustainability. In contrast, those with low sustainability habits showed more fluctuating evaluations, with no clear trend. These patterns support the observed interaction, suggesting that the effectiveness of different storytelling formats in conveying sustainability may depend on the viewer's own sustainable lifestyle behaviours.

**Figure 5.** Mean of SUSperc.



To explore whether narrative type moderated the effect of sustainability habits more clearly, a separate ANCOVA was run taking each condition into account. This revealed a significant interaction between story condition and SUSHab,  $F(46, 148) = 1.486, p = .040$ , indicating that sustainability habits influence perceived sustainability differently across storytelling types.

To better understand this interaction, separate regressions were conducted within each storytelling condition. Results showed that sustainability habits significantly predicted perceived sustainability in the Product – Low condition ( $B = 0.296, p = .016$ ). Conversely, sustainability habits were negatively associated with perceived sustainability ( $B = -0.311, p = .022$ ) in the control condition. No significant relationships were found in the high narrative conditions. These findings show that while sustainability habits did not uniformly predict sustainability perceptions across conditions, they became more apparent when analysing conditions separately.

**Table 13.** *Regression of Perceived Sustainability on Sustainability Habits by Condition.*

Condition	B	F	p-value
Control	-0.311	5.66	.022
Product – High	-0.035	0.10	.750
Product – Low	+0.296	6.35	.016
Brand – High	-0.015	0.03	.854
Brand – Low	+0.154	2.90	.096

Note: Regression models examined whether participants' sustainability habits (SUSHab) predicted their perceived brand sustainability (SUSperc) within each storytelling condition.

#### **4.5.4. Self-Identity and Its Impact on Trust**

Separate univariate analyses were conducted to examine whether participant's attitude towards fashion (Self\_ID), namely in terms of being part of one's identity, influenced trust differently across storytelling conditions. Self-identity significantly predicted trust in the Product – High ( $F = 4.581, p = .039$ ) and Brand – High ( $F = 7.758, p = .008$ ) conditions, but not in the control or Low narrative groups (see Table 14). These findings suggest that a more immersive narrative may activate identity-related processing, making messages appear more trustworthy for individuals who strongly associate fashion as a form of self-expression.

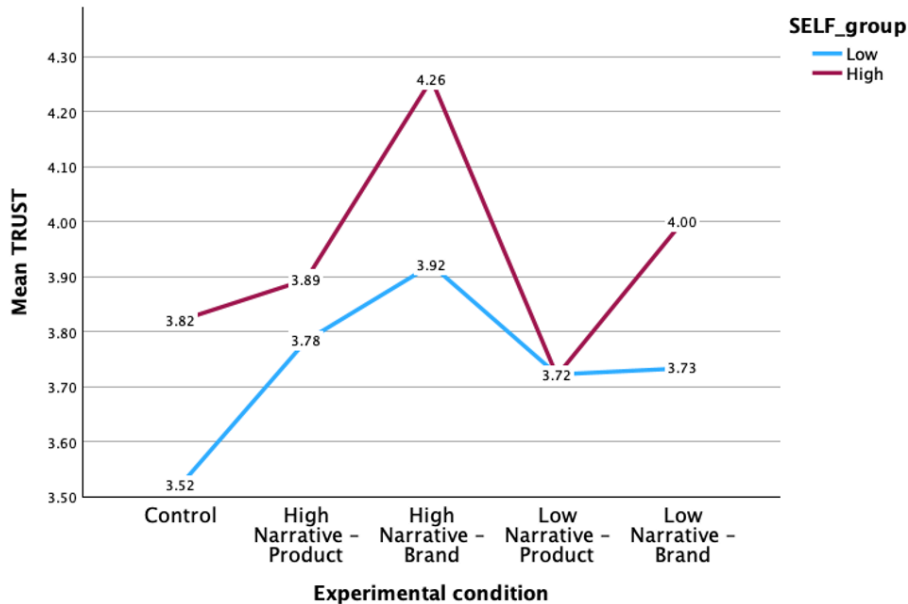
**Table 14.** Comparison of Self-Identity and Sustainability Habit Effects by Condition.

Condition	Self_ID → Trust (p)	SUSHab → Trust (p)	SUSHab → SUSperc (p)
Control	0.107 n.s.	0.338 n.s.	0.022 *
Product – High	0.039 *	0.532 n.s.	0.750 n.s.
Brand – High	0.008 **	0.293 n.s.	0.854 n.s.
Product – Low	0.331 n.s.	0.018 *	0.016 *
Brand – Low	0.213 n.s.	0.266 n.s.	0.096 †

\*Note: Asterisks indicate significance levels. \* indicates  $p < .05$ , \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ , † indicates  $p < .10$ . 'n.s.' stands for not significant.

Further, Figure 6 illustrates the interaction between storytelling condition and fashion-based self-identity on consumer trust. Trust peaked in the Brand – High condition for both groups, namely at  $M = 4.26$  for high self-identity individuals and  $M = 3.92$  for low-identity participants.

**Figure 6.** Interaction of storytelling condition and self-identity on consumer trust.



#### 4.5.5. Cultural Background Effects

Given the cultural heritage implied by the name *Olann* and the high prevalence of Irish respondents, representing the third biggest group in this study (15%), independent sample t-tests were conducted to add further clarity to the observed effects. Specifically, the analysis examined whether Irish participants responded differently to the brand due to its cultural significance compared to non-Irish participants. Results showed that Irish participants reported significantly higher values on perceived authenticity and emotional connection compared to non-Irish individuals. Additionally, Irish individuals reported higher levels of narrative transportation followed by an increased purchase intention. As a result, the findings suggest that a shared cultural identity may positively influence consumer responses to the brand. However, no significant differences were found for perceived brand value, trust, sustainability perception or self-identity. This suggests that while shared heritage may heighten emotions when engaging with the brand, its effect is less apparent regarding cognitive aspects such as attitudinal formation and brand alignment.

**Table 15.** *Exploratory Analysis of Cultural Background Effects.*

Variable	Irish Mean	Non-Irish Mean	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
AUTH	4.46	4.20	2.58	0.011	-0.47
EMO	4.02	3.51	4.47	< .001	-0.73
PI	4.27	3.94	2.95	0.004	-0.49
NT	4.17	3.83	2.58	0.011	-0.49

## **5. Findings and Discussion**

This study aimed to examine how different storytelling approaches, brand or product-focused, and their narrative intensity (high or low) influence consumer trust and purchase intention within the realm of sustainable fashion. The findings indicate that highly immersive brand-focused narratives significantly enhance perceived authenticity and trust. While purchase intention was not directly influenced, its relationship with storytelling was found to be mediated through authenticity. Other constructs such as brand value and emotional connection were not deemed significant in this context. Further analyses showed that the manipulation of story type, alongside narrative intensity, influenced consumer trust, with brand storytelling and high-intensity narratives leading to higher trust levels. Additionally, self-identity predicted trust only under high narrative conditions, while sustainability habits affected perceived brand sustainability in specific contexts – most notably, under low narrative, product-focused storytelling.

### **5.1. Overview of Hypotheses Testing**

In summary, H1 was rejected as the opposite effect was found to be true. Namely, brand-focused narratives had a stronger effect on consumer trust than product narratives did. No significant effects were found for purchase intention. H2a was supported, as the relationship between storytelling type and both trust and purchase intention were fully mediated by perceived authenticity. H2b and H2c were rejected, as perceived brand value and emotional connection did not significantly mediate the relationship between storytelling and trust or purchase intention. H3 was also rejected, as narrative transportation did not moderate the relationship between story type and the dependent variables. These findings show that perceived authenticity plays an important role as a mediator of this effect, whereas perceived brand value, emotional connection and narrative intensity had less of an effect.

### **5.2. Reassessing the Impact of Storytelling Approach**

The results revealed that brand storytelling produced significantly higher levels of consumer trust than product storytelling. While prior research emphasised product heritage and craftsmanship as trust-enhancing cues (e.g., Aimé, 2023; Woodside, 2010), the findings from this experiment suggest that consumers tend to respond more favourably towards brand-focused narratives,

supposedly due to the communication of a more general identity, mission and values, highly relevant when developing trust for a brand (Aimé, 2023). In the context of sustainable fashion, heritage cues may be more apparent when framed as a brand narrative, making tradition, brand mission and deep-rooted values of the brand more tangible, conveying authenticity through consistency. According to Woodside (2010), brands that foster a deeper psychological connection can increase comprehension, which makes it easier for the viewer to understand the purpose of the brand's existence. Viewing the brand as a 'higher-order' construct, defined by their sustainable actions through brand-framing rather than a mere provider of goods, could lead to consumers developing a deeper sense of trust (Garczarek-Bak et al., 2024; Park and Chang, 2022; Neumeier, 2015). The product-focused conditions may have lacked the emotional or symbolic depth required to facilitate trust with the viewer, whereas the brand conditions were more nuanced on this point. It is worth noting that the brand conditions paired with high narrative intensity resulted in the highest levels of trust, further suggesting that the persuasive power of the brand narrative may be heightened under immersive storytelling.

Although no significant difference was found between conditions in terms of purchase intention, alongside heritage communication, trust may serve as a foundational step in developing long-term loyalty. As engagement with the brand becomes more frequent, a self-brand connection could develop, increasing brand presence in the mind and with it, the likelihood of future investments (Aimé, 2023; Barney & Jones, 2023; Gosline et al., 2017; Rose et al., 2016). In the context of small or emerging brands, a focus on the identity of the brand may be more effective in establishing trust. Regardless of its short lifespan, the company can focus on conveying its purpose, values and mission by taking a brand-focused approach.

### **5.3. The Mediating Role of Perceived Authenticity**

The strongest, and only, empirical support emerged for H2a, as perceived authenticity fully mediated the relationship between storytelling type and both consumer trust and purchase intention. This reinforces the perceived importance of authenticity and the sentiment that consumers are more likely to trust and consider purchasing from brands whose storytelling aligns with sincerity and transparency, as is the case in past findings (Roth-Cohen et al., 2024; Neumann et al., 2020). While brand storytelling outperformed product storytelling in evoking

trust, this effect was explained by differences in perceptions of authenticity, emphasising that how the story is told falls secondary to how *authentic it feels* to the consumer.

#### **5.4. Perceived Brand Value and Emotional Connection: Limited Mediating Effects**

In contrast, H2b and H2c were not supported. Although perceived brand value and emotional connection were both significant predictors of trust and purchase intention, they were not significantly influenced by storytelling condition. A single exposure to the narrative condition may not have been enough to create strong emotional bonds or infer a deep perception of value, particularly for lesser known brands. This aligns with previous research suggesting that emotional connection and brand value typically develop over time and require repeated interactions with the brand (Kapoor et al., 2025; von Wallpach et al., 2017; Thomson et al., 2005). Similarly to the workings of heritage storytelling, which builds trust through consistency, a connection with the brand needs to be nurtured over time and cannot be rushed into worth.

#### **5.5. The Role of Narrative Intensity**

Narrative intensity was the central component of H3, which proposed that high narrative intensity would amplify the effects of storytelling type on consumer sentiment. However, the moderation analysis did not yield significant interaction effects. While narrative intensity alone had a marginal positive effect on trust, its influence was independent of whether the narrative was brand- or product-focused. Moreover, narrative transportation scores were higher in high-intensity storytelling conditions, indicating that immersive narratives may resonate more deeply with the viewer, but not necessarily in a way that strengthens the relationship between storytelling type and trust or intention. High narrative intensity was most positively received in the brand-focused conditions, which could suggest that brand narratives are more immersive than product narratives are.

Storytelling has only been applied to commercial advertising in the last few decades, which could provide clarity as to why consumers react more favourably to highly immersive narratives, opposed to the factual push-messaging associated with early forms of advertising (van Laer et al., 2019). A product, in essence, exists of factual attributes, while a brand can be up for interpretation. It may come down to the restrictive nature of a product that allows viewers to

connect more easily with a brand-focused narrative, leaving more room for imagination, personal reflection and emotional resonance. When it comes to sustainable fashion, brands may find that a highly immersive narrative draws the audience in, communicating the essence of the company through a compelling and unique narrative.

### **5.6. Exploratory Insights: The Influence of Sustainability Habits and Self-Identity**

Exploratory analyses provided additional insight into how individual differences might influence consumer responses to storytelling. The results confirmed that brand storytelling and high narrative intensity each independently enhanced consumer trust, though no interaction effect was found. ANCOVA results showed that perceived sustainability was a significant predictor of trust, regardless of story condition, while storytelling condition had no main effect when SUSperc was controlled.

Further analysis revealed that sustainability habits (SUSHab) only predicted perceived brand sustainability under specific conditions. In particular, SUSHab was positively associated with SUSperc in the Product – Low condition and negatively associated in the control group. Adding to the findings related to narrative transportation, the viewer’s sustainability habits were found to influence their perception of the brand’s sustainability, suggesting that more environmentally-conscious consumers preferred the clarity of the low narrative condition. While the literature discusses the effects of product attributes in signalling sustainable qualities, recent research adds an interesting layer, suggesting that Gen Z may be adverse to highly emotional narratives due to their familiarity and scepticism of greenwashing practices (Theocharis & Tsekouropoulos, 2025). As a result, this group seeks transparency and factual information from companies, wanting the freedom to create their own narrative. Given the young-skewing nature of this study’s sample, these findings support the generational shift towards clarity, namely among sustainably-oriented consumers, who seem to value control above all else.

Alternatively, self-identity (Self\_ID) was found to significantly predict trust in high narrative conditions, indicating that immersive storytelling may resonate more with individuals who view fashion as an extension of oneself. While the sustainable viewers of this study may appreciate the no-nonsense approach to sustainable marketing, these findings suggest that the fashion-forward

participants are more drawn to the highly immersive conditions. This relates back to prior research on the power of narrative intensity in shaping perceptions and influencing behaviour. In the fashion industry, brand equity is often built through image and well-executed design, which might reflect the fashion-centred consumer responses in this study, who appreciate a narrative that communicates on the same principles (Calvo Dopico & Calvo Porral, 2012).

Lastly, the alignment of cultural identity with the brand's heritage was found to influence levels of perceived authenticity, emotional connection, narrative transportation and purchase intention. These findings support the idea that storytelling may have a greater impact on individuals who identify with the brand, potentially magnifying the self-brand connection. Together, these findings reinforce the importance of tailoring narrative style to the prospective audience, as individual traits may heavily shape how messages are received.

## **5.7. Practical Implications**

For small or emerging sustainable fashion brands, the results underscore the importance of emphasising brand-level storytelling that evokes an authentic identity. While perhaps not significant in the study, findings allude to this being more effective under high narrative conditions, which amplified engagement and narrative transportation. The findings also highlight the limitations of storytelling in driving immediate purchase intentions. As a result, storytelling should be part of a broader strategy that includes a variety of cues, such as social proof, such as influencers and user reviews, alongside long-term brand building, signaling message consistency across channels.

As perceived authenticity emerged as the most influential mediator, sustainable brands should actively communicate what steps the company is taking in becoming more sustainable. The results indicate that consumers are more likely to trust and consider purchasing from brands that feel sincere, transparent, and consistent in their values. This insight is particularly relevant in a market heavily saturated with sustainability claims and issues pertaining to greenwashing, as consumers struggle to find brands they can confidently rely on. Furthermore, knowing the consumer remains one of the most powerful tools, as amplified in this study, individual

characteristics highly influence how a campaign might be perceived. Brands should therefore implement strategies to uncover what it is their following needs, for example through instagram polls, allowing direct communication from the consumer to the brand.

### **5.8. Theoretical Contributions**

This research contributes to the growing body of work on brand storytelling by demonstrating that the type of narrative focus (brand vs product) significantly influences consumer trust, with authenticity as the main psychological mechanism influencing this relationship. These findings build on prior work by Garczarek-Bak et al. (2024), extending their insights from within the wine industry to the sustainable fashion domain. The findings further highlight the limitations of short-form storytelling in shaping brand value and emotional connection, and suggest that narrative intensity may have limited effectiveness when conveyed through static formats. This challenges assumptions about the universal impact of emotionally rich storytelling and reiterates the importance of medium and individual traits in shaping responses.

## **6. Conclusion**

In summary, this research set out to explore whether a significant relationship exists between the type of storytelling, namely brand or product related, on the consumer's sense of trust and purchase intention. Three mediating variables were identified, namely perceived authenticity, emotional connection, and perceived brand value, of which only authenticity was found to significantly influence the reported trust of the brand. Participants were exposed to one of five differing conditions, manipulated on story type and narrative intensity (high vs low), which was previously viewed as the moderator in this relationship, but did not show any significant effect on the independent variables. None of the other hypotheses were deemed significant.

However, further analysis revealed the importance of perceived sustainability on trust, overriding the effect of storytelling type. Additionally, sustainability habits influenced perceived brand sustainability in the low narrative intensity condition, suggesting that highly sustainably conscious consumers were drawn to the objectivity, which aligns with previous thoughts. Moreover, self-identity was found to predict trust only in high-intensity narrative conditions, indicating that immersive storytelling may resonate more with consumers who view fashion as a form of self-expression.

### **6.1. Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study used convenience sampling as the survey was distributed via personal platforms, which inherently restricted its coverage and reach. This limits the generalisability of results as the majority of participants were European and in their twenties.

Second, the reliability of the perceived authenticity scale was slightly below the conventional threshold (Cronbach's  $\alpha < .70$ ), which may affect the internal consistency of this key construct.

Third, the experimental stimuli were brief and delivered in a static format, which may have limited the emotional depth of participants' responses. This could help explain why, despite being a strong predictor of trust and purchase intention, emotional connection did not emerge as a significant mediator. Emotional attachment often develops over time through richer and repeated exposure. Future studies could examine prolonged or recurring brand interactions, such

as multi-touchpoint storytelling or narratives conveyed through video, to more accurately evaluate this phenomenon.

Fourth, a fictional brand was used for this study, which may have influenced trust and purchase intention scores. In particular, the significant presence of Irish participants should be taken into account when analysing the results. Due to the brand's name and heritage positioning, cultural affinity could have amplified emotional responses. It should be noted that a company with this name does exist, which could have further affected results. Future research should explore whether these findings hold for well-known or legacy brands.

Fifth, although narrative transportation was measured, its potential mediating role in the process remains underexplored.

Lastly, given the number of hypotheses tested, the potential for an inflated family-wise error rate should be acknowledged.

In summary, future studies could investigate storytelling effects across distinct consumer segments (e.g., high vs low sustainability involvement), extend the experiment over multiple touchpoints and on various platforms, or test more emotionally rich media formats such as video content. Additionally, future research could explore other potential moderators, such as self-identity, sustainability orientation, or consumer scepticism, to better understand how and when storytelling strategies are most effective. While this study focused on the psychology of marketing and heavily relied on existing theory, practical research could offer valuable insights by simulating real-world behaviours. For example, investigating the effect of group conformity bias on the psychological variables measured in this study.

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## Appendix

### Appendix A. Full Stimuli Texts for Storytelling Conditions accompanied by image.

#### Condition 1: Product Storytelling – High Narrative Transportation

**Please read the following story about Olann’s product line carefully before continuing.**

Olann’s product line, launched in 2024, features garments made from 100% superfine lamb’s wool, including its signature sweater, designed to blend comfort with sustainability. The name, Olann (Irish for *wool*), reflects the brand’s focus on natural materials and local production. The wool is spun in Irish mills using traditional low-impact methods and is left undyed to preserve its natural tone and soft, textured finish.

Sourced from sheep raised on Irish land, the wool reflects farming practices rooted in care— for both animals and the environment. Free from synthetic blends, this mono-material (one type of fabric) garment is designed for circularity, enhancing recyclability and biodegrading naturally at the end of its life.

Its breathable, thermo-regulating properties offer comfort across seasons, making it a timeless addition to any wardrobe. This product is made to last, to travel with you, and to carry its own quiet story over time.



## Condition 2: Product Storytelling – Low Narrative Transportation

**Please read the following content about Olann’s product line carefully before continuing.**

The Olann signature sweater, launched in 2024, is made from superfine lamb’s wool, responsibly sourced from traceable suppliers.

The wool is undyed and spun using low-impact methods, with production in small batches to minimise waste. The sweater is made from a single material (100% wool), which supports recyclability and simplifies the end-of-life process. Natural flecks from the original fleece remain in the yarn, giving each piece subtle variation in tone.

The sweater is designed to be soft on the skin, breathable, and structured for movement. It’s intended for frequent wear and easy care, combining comfort with practicality.



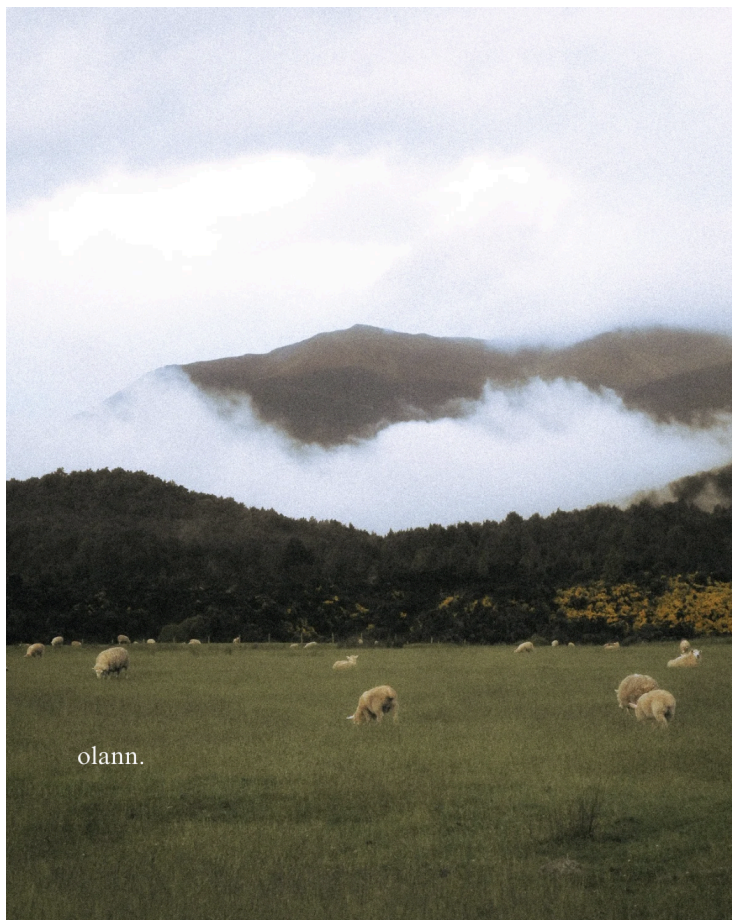
### Condition 3: Brand Storytelling – High Narrative Transportation

Please read the following story about the brand, Olann, carefully before continuing.

Founded in 2024, Olann was created to connect traditional Irish wool production with contemporary clothing. The name, Olann (Irish for *wool*), reflects the brand's focus on natural materials and local production. Working with regional suppliers and independent Irish mills, Olann ensures that sustainability is embedded throughout the supply chain—from sourcing to spinning to finishing.

The brand uses certified, undyed wool and low-impact processes to guarantee traceability, reduce waste, and limit chemical use. The wool comes from flocks raised on Irish land, like those shown below, where traditional farming practices prioritise animal welfare and care for the land. These practices shape how materials are grown, gathered, and honoured.

Olann embraces a slower approach to fashion—one that values practicality, longevity, and comfort. It stands for careful production, everyday quality, and a deep respect for animals, people, and the environment, creating garments meant to be lived in and kept for years to come.



#### Condition 4: Brand Storytelling – Low Narrative Transportation

Please read the following content about the brand, Olann, carefully before continuing.

Olann, established in 2024, is a sustainable fashion brand based in Ireland. The brand works with regional suppliers to source certified, traceable wool and uses undyed fibres to minimise chemical processing.

Production uses low-impact methods and mono-material construction (one type of fabric) to support circular design and recyclability. Garments are produced in small batches to reduce waste and maintain quality.

Olann prioritises environmental responsibility, animal welfare, and ethical sourcing. Its values focus on minimalism, slow fashion, and collaboration with traditional farming communities.



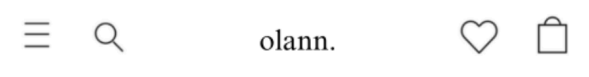
## Condition 5: Control Group

Brand: Olann

- 100% superfine lamb's wool (undyed)
- Traceable fibre sourcing
- Thermo-regulating and breathable
- No synthetic fibres
- Small-batch production to reduce waste
- Recyclable, biodegradable material

**Sample Product.** Shown in every condition.

Here is an example of a product from Olann to help you visualise the brand.



### **The Signature Sweater**

Made from 100% Superfine Irish Wool

## **Appendix B. Survey**

### **Section 1: Introduction and Consent**

Thank you for participating in this academic research study on consumer perceptions in sustainable fashion marketing, conducted as part of my Master's thesis at Católica Lisbon School of Business and Economics.

In this short survey, you will be asked to read brand-related content and answer questions about perceptions and preferences. You will be randomly assigned to one of five versions of the brand message. The survey will take approximately 5–10 minutes.

Participation is voluntary, responses are anonymous, and you may withdraw at any time. For any questions, contact: s-amadden@ucp.pt

I confirm that I am 18 years or older and consent to participate.

### **Section 2: Stimulus — Product High Condition**

Please see Appendix A, Condition 1.

### **Section 2: Stimulus — Product Low Condition**

Please see Appendix A, Condition 2.

### **Section 2: Stimulus — Brand High Condition**

Please see Appendix A, Condition 3.

### **Section 2: Stimulus — Brand Low Condition**

Please see Appendix A, Condition 4.

### **Section 2: Stimulus — Control Condition**

Please see Appendix A, Condition 5.

### Section 3: Perceived Brand Authenticity

Please indicate your agreement with the following statements about the brand Olann:

Item	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
The brand appears to be honest about its values.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This brand appears to remain connected to its founding values and roots.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This brand has a strong link to the past, which is still celebrated today.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This brand is committed to producing high-quality products.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

#### Section 4: Perceived Brand Value

The following statements ask about your perception of Olann's quality, style, and craftsmanship:

Item	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
This brand offers high-quality products.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The brand appears to offer good value based on its quality and craftsmanship.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I associate this brand with premium craftsmanship.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This brand has consistent quality.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Section 5: Emotional Connection to the Brand

These statements relate to your connection to the brand Olann and its story:

Item	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel connected to this brand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This brand feels familiar to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This brand reflects things that are important to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel a sense of caring for this brand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Section 6: Trust in the Brand

Please rate the following statements based on your current impression:

Item	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I trust this brand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I believe this brand has the consumer's best interests in mind.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would rely on this brand to follow through on its promises.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Section 7: Purchase Intention

How likely are you to engage with the brand Olann in the following ways?

Item	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
It is very likely that I would buy from this brand if it were available.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would consider purchasing from this brand the next time I need this type of product.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would be open to trying this brand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Section 8: Narrative Transportation (Manipulation Check)

How did the content come across to you?

Item	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I was mentally involved in the content while reading it.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I could easily picture the setting and what was being described.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I felt connected to the background or values presented.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The content fully held my attention from start to finish.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Section 9: Self-Identity

These questions relate to how your clothing choices connect to your personality and values:

Item	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I use fashion to express my personal values or beliefs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I prefer brands that reflect my personality.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wearing clothing from a brand I relate to makes me feel more confident.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel emotionally connected to brands that tell a story I identify with.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Section 10: Sustainability Perceptions

What's your impression of the brand's commitment to sustainability and ethical practices?

Item	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
This brand appears to be genuinely committed to sustainable practices.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The products from this brand seem to be made in an environmentally responsible way.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I believe this brand's commitment to sustainability is authentic.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
This brand reflects strong ethical and environmental values.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Section 11: Personal Sustainability Habits

Please share how much you agree with a few statements about your approach to fashion and shopping:

Item	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
I actively look for fashion brands that are environmentally friendly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I avoid fast fashion as much as I can.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I would consider paying more for clothing that is sustainably produced.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I often consider the environmental impact of my clothing purchases.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Section 12: Demographics

What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

What country best reflects your cultural identity? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender?

Male  Female  Non-binary  Prefer not to say

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

High school  Some college  Associate degree  Bachelor's degree  
 Master's degree  Doctorate/professional degree  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

How important is fashion in your lifestyle?

Not at all  Slightly  Moderately  Very  Extremely

How often do you purchase new clothing?

More than once/week  Weekly  Few times/month  Monthly  
 Every few months  Once or twice/year  Rarely

Is there anything else you'd like to add before finalising your response?

---

## Appendix C. Qualitative Interviews: Choosing the Brand Name

### Interview 1

The first semi-structured, in-person interview was conducted (female, 25) as part of an exploratory qualitative study to assess initial consumer perceptions of two potential brand names: *Arden & Co* and *Olann*. The participant was informed that there were no correct answers and was encouraged to share instinctive associations related to feeling, imagery, or product category. It is important to note that the participant had no prior knowledge of any existing brands with either of the names, allowing for unbiased feedback.

At first glance, she indicated a slight preference for *Arden & Co*, describing it as evoking a “cute, sustainable but vibey clothes store,” and noting associations with minimalist aesthetics, neutral tones, and “sleek lines.” However, once informed that the hypothetical brand would specialise in sustainable wool clothing, her preference shifted clearly in favour of *Olann*. Noting, “I see wool more for *Olann*,” adding that the name intuitively evoked warmth, softness, and a more natural or traditional quality, attributes she felt were more appropriate for a heritage-based wool brand.

The participant further noted that *Olann* sounded more artisanal and rooted, whereas *Arden & Co* felt more commercial. This shift suggests that *Olann* may be more effective in conveying values of authenticity, sustainability, and heritage.

## Interview 2

A second in-person interview was conducted (female, 24), using the same open-ended approach. She was asked to share her immediate impressions of *Arden & Co* and *Olann* without receiving any contextual information about the brand or product. She also confirmed to be unfamiliar with any companies using either name, ensuring that her feedback was based entirely on first impressions.

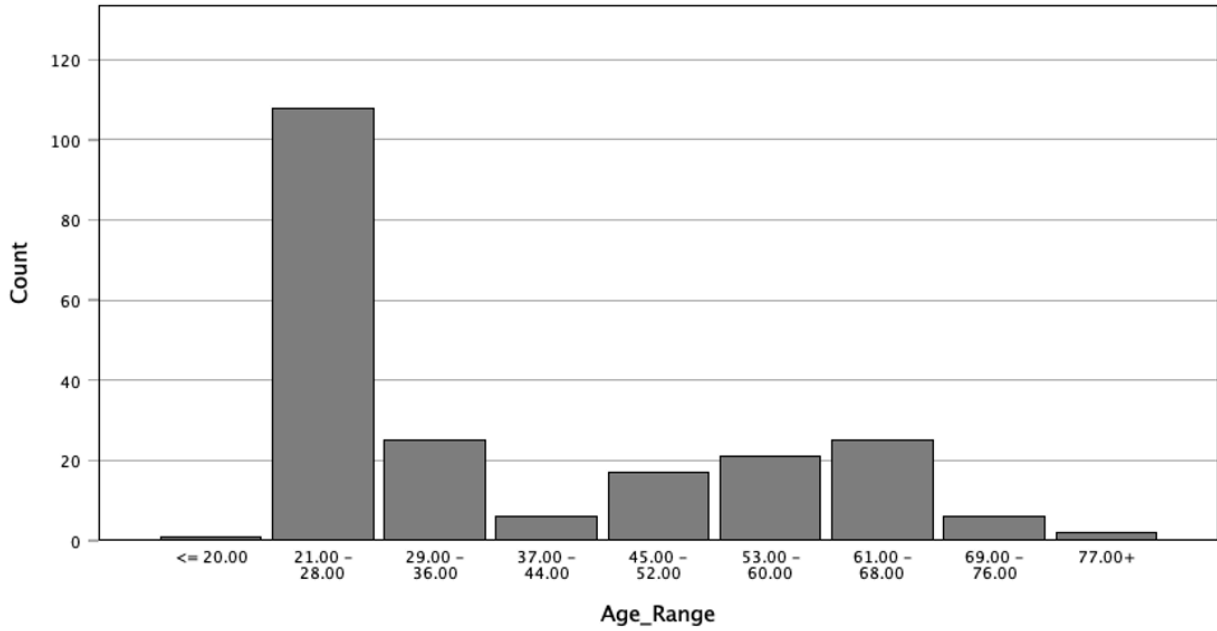
Initially, *Olann* was associated with “jewellery” and “clothing,” and was described as sounding polished and boutique-like. In contrast, the reaction to *Olann* was more passionate. She mentioned that it gave off “Scandinavian” vibes and reminded her of “skincare or watches,” though she found these associations difficult to pinpoint. Nevertheless, she perceived *Olann* as unique and “very fitting”.

When informed that the brand concept centred around sustainable wool fashion, she immediately responded, “*Olann*,” stating that the name aligned more naturally with the product. She emphasised that it felt more appropriate for a brand rooted in natural materials and tradition, describing it as “a better fit” for a sustainable wool clothing label.

## Appendix D. Figures & Tables.

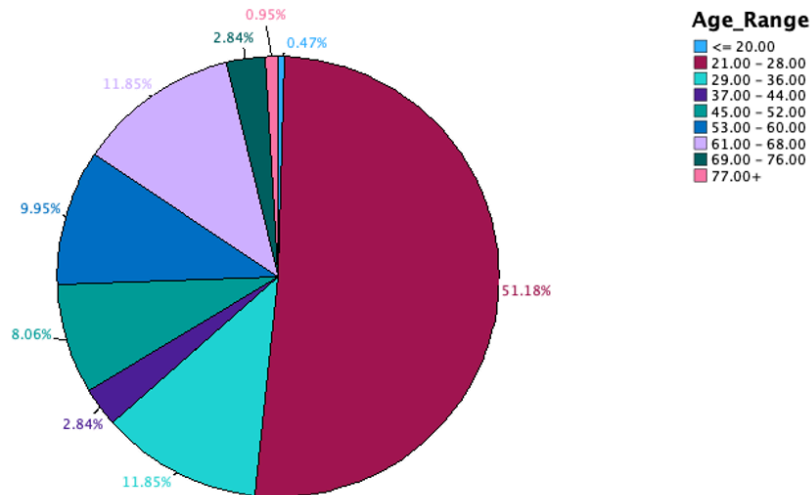
D1. Table. Bar chart displaying participant age ranges.

Simple Bar Count of Age\_Range



D2. Figure. Pie chart displaying participant age ranges.

Pie Chart Count of Age\_Range



**D3. Table.** *Exploratory Analysis of Cultural Background Effects - Full Test.*

Variable	Irish Mean	Non-Irish Mean	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
AUTH	4.46	4.20	2.58	0.011	-0.47
EMO	4.02	3.51	4.47	< .001	-0.73
PI	4.27	3.94	2.95	0.004	-0.49
NT	4.17	3.83	2.58	0.011	-0.49
PBV	4.28	4.25	0.36	0.714	-0.05
TRUST	4.20	4.06	1.30	0.196	-0.21
SELF_ID	3.97	3.96	0.12	0.908	-0.02
SUSperc	4.32	4.21	0.92	0.36	-0.15