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Technology-Authenticity Paradox: Systematic Review on Digital Capabilities, Consumer Skepticism, and Sustainable Brand Equity

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ABSTRACT

The integration of technology into digital marketing innovations to convey messages of sustainability commitment has the potential to pose risks to brand authenticity. Although technology adoption is on the rise, the literature remains fragmented in mapping how digital marketing capabilities support sustainability narratives without eroding consumer trust in the authenticity of a brand campaign's objectives. This article examines the phenomenon of the "Technology-Authenticity Paradox" through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) following the PRISMA protocol, with a systematic search of the Scopus database covering the period 2015–2026. This study synthesizes various articles on communication in digital marketing, consumer skepticism, and sustainable brand equity. By integrating Signaling Theory and Attribution Theory, this article will explore how digital capabilities interact with consumer skepticism in the communication of sustainability values, so that brands can align the communication of these sustainability commitments with the authenticity of their long-term brand objectives. These findings are expected to provide practical recommendations and a new conceptual framework for the implementation of technology in digital marketing as a catalyst for trust.

Keywords: *Consumer Skepticism, Digital Marketing Capabilities, Sustainable Brand Equity, Technology-Authenticity Paradox.*

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1. | INTRODUCTION

The accelerating pace of digital transformation has fundamentally altered the marketing landscape, prompting organizations to integrate digital technology as a key instrument of strategic communication while simultaneously responding to mounting global pressure to disclose sustainability commitments across an increasingly accessible range of digital channels (Hahn et al., 2015; Keegan & Rowley, 2017; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Contemporary digital marketing increasingly relies on interactive communication mechanisms, including influencer marketing and brand engagement strategies, to strengthen consumer relationships and communication effectiveness (Hadi et al., 2025). Yet beneath this dual momentum lies a significant paradox: the very technological sophistication that amplifies the reach and measurability of sustainability communication simultaneously risks eroding consumer perception of brand authenticity (Nyilasy et al., 2014; Napoli et al., 2014). Digitally literate consumers now subject sustainability claims packaged through automated and algorithmically driven media to heightened critical scrutiny, generating a form of skepticism that threatens long-term brand equity (Matthes & Wonneberger, 2014; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006).

Table 1. Research gap

Research Stream	Main Focus	Limitation	Gap Addressed by This Study
Digital Marketing Capability	Performance and efficiency	Limited discussion on authenticity perception	Integrates authenticity as evaluative mechanism
Consumer Skepticism	Advertising distrust	Rarely linked with AI-driven sustainability communication	Positions skepticism within digital ecosystems
Sustainable Brand Equity	Long-term brand value	Lacks paradox-based explanation	Introduces recursive paradox framework
AI Marketing Research	Automation and personalization	Overlooks long-term trust erosion	Explains technology–trust tension

This issue is compounded by persistent fragmentation in the existing literature. Research on digital marketing capabilities has developed in isolation from the discourse on brand sustainability (Kannan & Li, 2017; Apasrawirote et al., 2022), while studies on consumer skepticism have largely excluded digital technology as a moderating variable (Mohr et al., 2001; Kim & Rim, 2024). Existing scholarship also predominantly adopts linear assumptions in which digital capability is treated as a direct performance driver, systematically overlooking the recursive tension between technological efficiency and authenticity perception that characterizes contemporary

digital brand environments (Homburg & Wielgos, 2022; Al Koliby et al., 2024). Consequently, neither academics nor practitioners possess an integrated framework capable of coherently explaining the interaction between digital capabilities, consumer skepticism, and sustainable brand equity.

To address this gap, this study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) following the PRISMA 2020 protocol, conducting a systematic search of the Scopus database (2015–2026) to synthesize literature across four key constructs: digital marketing capabilities, sustainable marketing communication, consumer skepticism, and sustainable brand equity (Papadas et al., 2017; Gorska-Warsewicz et al., 2021). By integrating Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973) and Attribution Theory (Kelley, 1973) within a unified analytical framework, this study conceptualizes the Technology–Authenticity Paradox, a recursive cycle in which digital capabilities simultaneously create and erode brand value contingent upon consumer authenticity perception, and is guided by three research questions: (1) How do digital marketing capabilities interact with consumer skepticism in sustainability communication, and under what conditions does this interaction erode or reinforce perceived brand authenticity? (2) Through what mechanisms do Signaling Theory and Attribution Theory jointly explain the recursive dynamics of this paradox? (3) What strategic conditions enable digital marketing technology to function as a trust catalyst rather than a skepticism trigger in the context of sustainable brand equity?

2. | LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Marketing Capabilities and Sustainable Marketing Communication

Sustainable marketing communication has emerged as a strategic response to the imperative of integrating environmental and social dimensions into marketing practice, requiring consistency between the messages conveyed and the company's operational reality (Du et al., 2010; Papadas et al., 2017). Within this framework, digital marketing capabilities defined as an organization's capacity to adaptively integrate technology, data, and digital processes, serve as the primary instruments through which a brand's sustainability narrative is constructed and received, operating across four dimensions: digital content management, analytics, multi-channel platform management, and communication personalization (Holliman & Rowley, 2014; Kannan & Li, 2017; Apasrawirote et al., 2022). Collectively, these dimensions enable brands to extend reach and deepen consumer engagement within sustainability narratives (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Hadi et al., 2025).

However, the effectiveness of digital capabilities in sustainability communication is inherently ambivalent. Social media transforms consumers from passive message recipients into co-creators of brand sustainability narratives (Muntinga et al., 2011), yet Lyon and Montgomery (2015) demonstrate that enhanced digital communication capabilities may facilitate greenwashing when sustainability claims are not supported by substantive organizational practices. Recent studies further suggest that digital marketing capabilities can strengthen sustainable competitive performance when

supported by innovation and entrepreneurial culture (Al Koliby et al., 2024), while green marketing capabilities contribute to sustainable development through environmentally responsible strategic configurations (Nath & Siepong, 2022). This contradiction confirms that digital capability is a neutral condition: it can simultaneously strengthen and erode trust, with the direction of influence determined by the substantive integrity underpinning the communication (Foerster-Metz et al., 2018; Fang, 2024).

Consumer Skepticism in the Digital Context

Consumer skepticism is defined as an individual's systematic tendency to distrust persuasive marketing claims due to perceived ulterior motives (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). In sustainability contexts, this construct manifests as specific doubt regarding the authenticity of environmental and social commitments regardless of the evidence provided (Mohr et al., 2001). The digital marketing environment has substantially exacerbated this condition: exposure to targeted advertising, sponsored content, and algorithmically curated communication amplifies critical vigilance (Ali et al., 2021; Lee & Cheong, 2024), a trend reinforced by the increasing prevalence of greenwashing and sustainability-related misinformation (Li & Ding, 2024; Fang, 2024). Empirical evidence consistently shows that skepticism weakens advertising effectiveness, diminishes purchase intention, and moderates the positive impact of sustainability and CSR communication on consumer behavior (Luo et al., 2020; De Sio et al., 2022; Kim & Rim, 2024).

Nevertheless, skepticism is not exclusively destructive. It functions simultaneously as a protective cognitive mechanism that encourages critical information evaluation and deters unethical practices such as greenwashing, positioning it as both a barrier and a structural regulator within digital marketing ecosystems (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Li & Ding, 2024). Studies on green advertising and sustainability claims suggest that skepticism can motivate consumers to scrutinize corporate environmental communication more carefully, thereby increasing demand for transparency and authenticity (Kassie & Rhee, 2023; Higueras-Castillo et al., 2024). In technology-driven sustainability communication environments characterized by information saturation and limited claim verifiability, the negative effects of skepticism tend to dominate, making its management a strategic priority rather than a peripheral concern (Bhaduri & Copeland, 2021; Kim & Rim, 2024.

Sustainable Brand Equity as a Long-Term Outcome

Sustainable brand equity extends the consumer-based brand equity framework by incorporating environmental, social, and governance commitments as integral components of long-term brand value (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Papadas et al., 2017). Structurally, it operates through four mutually reinforcing components: sustainability-contextualized brand awareness, associations reflecting honesty and commitment consistency, sustainability quality perceptions, and value-alignment-based loyalty, forming a system vulnerable to negative spillover effects whereby damage to any single dimension due to rising skepticism systematically weakens the remaining components (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2005). Recent systematic evidence further confirms that

sustainability-oriented brand equity is increasingly shaped by consumer trust, environmental responsibility, and authenticity perceptions (Gorska-Warsewicz et al., 2021).

The literature remains divided regarding the precise role of digital technology in building or undermining sustainable brand equity. While one stream argues that digital communication capabilities strengthen equity through transparency and engagement mechanisms (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Homburg & Wielgos, 2022), other studies suggest that perceived authenticity remains a more important determinant of long-term brand value than communication intensity alone (Napoli et al., 2014; Södergren, 2021). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that sustainability initiatives contribute positively to brand equity when supported by credible environmental performance and consumer trust (Hussain et al., 2020; Shanti & Joshi, 2022; Jannah et al., 2024). When digital communication is perceived as inconsistent with actual organizational behavior, eroded trust acts as a negative mediator that systematically weakens all dimensions of sustainable brand equity (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2005; Fang, 2024). The pivotal question, therefore, is not whether digital technology builds or destroys equity, but through what mechanisms it determines whether authenticity is perceived or questioned by consumers.

Conceptual Integration: The Technology–Authenticity Paradox

The synthesis above reveals an interconnected yet tension-filled system that cannot be adequately captured by any single existing framework. Digital capabilities drive efficiency, personalization, and scalability while simultaneously triggering skepticism through perceptions of manipulation and artificiality. Recent evidence suggests that advanced digital marketing capabilities and AI-enabled marketing systems enhance communication effectiveness but may also intensify concerns regarding transparency and credibility when consumers perceive excessive technological intervention (Apasrawirote et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2025). Skepticism undermines marketing effectiveness and brand equity, while authenticity functions as a critical mediating mechanism that determines whether technological application reinforces trust or erodes it. Sustainable brand equity is thus the cumulative outcome of a brand's capacity to balance technological efficiency with authentic communication, a dynamic this study conceptualizes as the Technology Authenticity Paradox: a recursive process in which digital capabilities simultaneously create and destroy value contingent upon consumer perception.

This framework is anchored in two complementary theoretical pillars. Signaling Theory positions the brand as a sender of signals intended to communicate sustainability commitment to consumers who cannot directly verify such claims, where signal credibility is determined by cost, visibility, and proportionality (Spence, 1973; Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Connelly et al., 2011). Attribution Theory complements this from the consumer perspective: individuals actively evaluate the motives behind signals and form intrinsic or extrinsic attributions that determine whether authenticity is perceived or doubted (Kelley, 1973; Ellen et al., 2006). Recent studies demonstrate that transparent communication practices strengthen perceived authenticity, whereas perceived greenwashing and strategic inconsistency increase skepticism toward sustainability claims (Yang & Battocchio, 2021; Li & Ding, 2024; Fang, 2024). When a brand's digital signals exceed a threshold of proportionality, consumers' attribution processes generate extrinsic conclusions that trigger skepticism, erode brand equity, and recursively

compel adjustments to communication strategy, a cycle moderated by transparency, humanization, brand value alignment, and responsible data practices.

3. | RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to identify, evaluate, and synthesize evidence on digital marketing capabilities, consumer skepticism, perceived authenticity, and sustainable brand equity. The methodological design follows the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, ensuring structural rigor, transparency, and replicability across a research domain spanning both technological and psychological constructs (Page et al., 2021). A literature search was conducted in the Scopus database using Boolean operators combining the following key terms: "digital capabilities," "marketing technology," "consumer skepticism," "authenticity," and "sustainable brand equity." Inclusion criteria specified publications from 2015 to 2026; peer-reviewed journal articles and review papers; English language; and Scopus indexing (Q1–Q4). This timeframe was selected to capture recent developments in digital transformation while maintaining theoretical continuity.

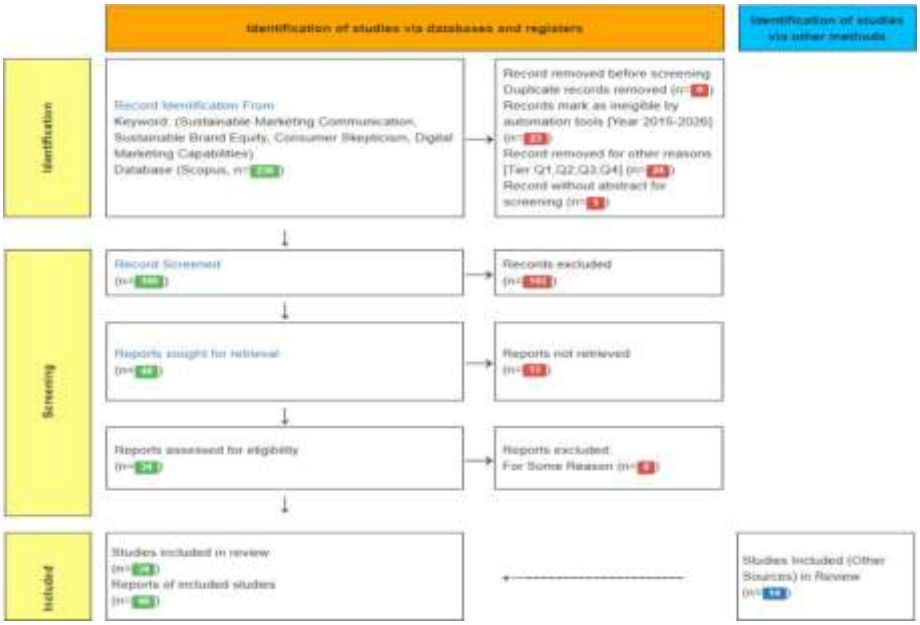


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram

The initial search yielded 238 records, which were subsequently subjected to a systematic screening process following PRISMA procedures (Page et al., 2021). No duplicate records were identified. Articles outside the publication range, studies that failed to meet minimum journal quality requirements, and records lacking sufficient bibliographic information were excluded during the screening process to ensure the credibility and reliability of the final corpus. Titles and abstracts were then evaluated based on their relevance to the four core constructs of the study. The remaining articles were assessed in full text according to conceptual contribution, methodological rigor,

and contextual relevance. From this process, 48 studies were selected for inclusion in the final review, consistent with established recommendations emphasizing a balance between comprehensiveness and analytical depth in business and management literature reviews (Tranfield et al., 2003; Kamara & Widagdo, 2022.

The selected studies encompass a variety of methodological approaches, including Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), surveys, experimental designs, mixed-methods approaches, conceptual studies, and review articles. This diversity enables the synthesis of evidence across technological, behavioral, and strategic dimensions of sustainable digital marketing

4. | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Included Studies

The final review corpus consists of 48 studies published between 2015 and 2026. The studies span multiple disciplinary domains, including digital marketing, sustainability, consumer behavior, brand management, business ethics, and strategic communication. The publication trend demonstrates growing scholarly attention to the interaction between digital transformation and sustainability communication, particularly after 2020, reflecting increasing concern regarding authenticity, consumer skepticism, and technology-enabled marketing practices.

The corpus is dominated by quantitative studies employing survey designs, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), and experimental approaches, supplemented by conceptual reviews and systematic literature reviews. This methodological diversity provides a comprehensive basis for examining how digital marketing capabilities influence consumer perceptions and sustainable brand outcomes across different industrial and communication contexts.

Thematic classification of the studies revealed four dominant research streams: digital marketing capability and sustainable communication, consumer skepticism toward sustainability claims, authenticity and transparency in brand communication, and sustainable brand equity. The interaction among these themes provides the foundation for the Technology–Authenticity Paradox framework developed in this study.

Table 2. Summary of study

Authors & Year	Study Focus	Method	Platform Context	Key Findings / Contributions
Acatrinei & Miu (2025)	AI vs. human-generated email communication	Experimental	Email marketing	AI-generated emails increase consumer skepticism compared with human-written messages.
Ali et al. (2021)	Social values and advertising effectiveness	SEM	Advertising	Consumer skepticism moderates the effectiveness of socially oriented advertising.
Almutairi et al. (2026)	Brand equity and repurchase intention	SEM	E-commerce	Brand equity strongly drives sustainable repurchase intention in online markets.
Apasrawirote et al. (2022)	Digital marketing capability	Quantitative	Digital business	Digital marketing capability integrates technological, analytical, and strategic resources that improve marketing effectiveness.
Aziz & Niazi (2024)	Destination brand equity	SEM	Tourism	Sustainable practices enhance destination brand equity and responsible consumer behavior.
Behera et al. (2024)	ICT and sustainability	Conceptual	Digital marketing	Intelligent technologies strengthen sustainable marketing practices and organizational performance.
Bhaduri & Copeland (2021)	Transparency and consumer skepticism	Experimental	Fashion	Information transparency reduces consumer skepticism and improves brand evaluation.
Bordian et al. (2023)	Sustainable marketing communication	Survey	Hospitality	Sustainable marketing communication positively influences customer responses and loyalty.
Bordian et al. (2024)	Value co-creation and sustainability	SEM	Hospitality	Sustainable practices enhance brand equity through value co-creation mechanisms.

Carbajal-Rubio et al. (2024)	Environmental responsibility and brand equity	Survey	Food industry	Corporate environmental responsibility significantly improves multiple dimensions of brand equity.
Cheng et al. (2020)	Shopping values and skepticism	SEM	Retail	Hedonic and utilitarian values influence skepticism and shape green consumption behavior.
Copeland & Bhaduri (2020)	Consumer knowledge and brand relationships	Survey	Apparel	Consumer knowledge reduces skepticism and strengthens brand relationships.
De Sio et al. (2022)	Green advertising skepticism	Survey	Green food marketing	Green trust mediates the relationship between advertising skepticism and green purchase intentions.
Dinh et al. (2023)	Green promotion mix	SEM	Marketing campaigns	A comprehensive green promotion mix strengthens green brand equity.
Furnham (2024)	Sustainability skepticism	Survey	Sustainability communication	Individual attitudes and beliefs significantly influence skepticism toward sustainability and climate-related claims.
Gorska-Warsewicz et al. (2021)	Green brand equity	Systematic Literature Review	Multi-industry	Green brand equity is strongly associated with sustainability perceptions, trust, and loyalty.
Higueras-Castillo et al. (2024)	Green advertising skepticism	Quantitative	Electric vehicles	Consumer skepticism negatively affects perceived value and sustainable purchase decisions.
Homburg & Wielgos (2022)	Digital marketing capability and firm performance	Quantitative	Multi-industry	Digital marketing capabilities generate significant strategic and performance advantages.
Hussain et al. (2020)	Sustainable brand equity and firm performance	SEM	Hospitality	Sustainable brand equity improves organizational performance through competitive advantage.

Jannah et al. (2024)	Green trust and green brand equity	Quantitative	Healthcare	Green trust mediates the relationship between sustainability perceptions and green brand equity.
Jung & Shegai (2023)	Digital marketing innovation	Quantitative	Firms	Marketing capability mediates the positive impact of digital marketing innovation on firm performance.
Kassie & Rhee (2023)	Green claim skepticism	Survey	Distribution channels	Brand familiarity influences the development of skepticism toward environmental claims.
Khan et al. (2022)	Green brand equity	SEM	Consumer goods	Consumer skepticism negatively moderates the formation of green brand equity.
Kim & Rim (2024)	CSR communication skepticism	Survey	CSR communication	Public skepticism and distrust significantly shape responses to CSR communication initiatives.
Kumar et al. (2025)	AI capabilities and marketing effectiveness	Quantitative	Technology-enabled marketing	AI capabilities enhance marketing effectiveness through their interaction with marketing capabilities.
Lee (2017)	CSR communication digitalization	Content Analysis	Social media	Digital platforms amplify CSR communication effectiveness but require authenticity to avoid skepticism.
Lim & Lee (2023)	CSR communication design	Experimental	Corporate messaging	Message fit and cognitive fluency significantly reduce consumer skepticism toward CSR communication.
Luo et al. (2020)	Green advertising skepticism and purchase intention	SEM	Social media	Consumer skepticism significantly reduces green purchase intention through diminished trust.

Masrianto et al. (2022)	Digital marketing capability evaluation	Index Development	Multi-industry	Developed a Digital Marketing Utilization Index for evaluating and improving organizational digital marketing capability.
Nath & Siepong (2022)	Green marketing capability	Configuration Analysis	Sustainable business	Green marketing capability supports sustainable development and environmental performance.
Nguyen & Nguyen (2024)	Green advertising skepticism	Survey	Beauty industry	Skepticism toward green advertising reduces purchase intention in beauty products.
Odoom (2025)	Sustainable digital marketing	Quantitative	Digital platforms	Consumer education and empowerment strengthen brand reputation and engagement in sustainable digital marketing.
Ramasamy et al. (2020)	CSR perception and consumer values	SEM	CSR communication	Consumer skepticism weakens the relationship between CSR perceptions and behavioral outcomes.
Rosado-Pinto & Loureiro (2026)	Brand authenticity	Conceptual	Brand management	Provides updated conceptualization and future directions for brand authenticity research.
Schade et al. (2022)	CSR skepticism	Experimental	Corporate communication	CSR motives, message framing, and organizational fit influence skepticism toward sustainability partnerships.
Shanti & Joshi (2022)	Sustainability and brand equity	Survey	Hotels	Sustainable practices positively contribute to the development of brand equity.
Sitorus (2017)	Marketing communication mix and retention	Survey	Tourism	Marketing communication mix improves customer retention and competitive advantage.
Södergren (2021)	Brand authenticity	Literature Review	Branding	Synthesizes 25 years of brand authenticity research and identifies authenticity as a

				central driver of consumer trust.
Taufique (2022)	Emotion in green marketing	Quantitative	Marketing	Emotional appeals significantly enhance sustainable consumption behavior.
Walter et al. (2024)	Authenticity versus woke washing	Experimental	Branding	Authentic brand purpose increases credibility whereas perceived woke washing increases skepticism.
Wang (2020)	Digital marketing capabilities	Empirical	International firms	Digital marketing capabilities strengthen firm performance through relational and strategic marketing mechanisms.
Yang & Battocchio (2021)	Transparent communication and authenticity	Survey	Branding	Transparent brand communication enhances perceived authenticity and positive consumer responses.
Yang & Hsu (2017)	CSR advertising skepticism	Survey	Advertising	Skepticism toward CSR advertising negatively affects consumer attitudes.
Yu (2020)	Green advertising skepticism factors	Experimental	Advertising	Consumer skepticism is shaped by perceived advertising motives and individual characteristics.
Zhou et al. (2023)	Blockchain disclosure and trust	Quantitative	Logistics and supply chains	Blockchain-based disclosure enhances trust and reduces skepticism in supply chains.
Al Koliby et al. (2024)	Digital marketing capability and sustainable competitiveness	Quantitative	Manufacturing SMEs	Digital marketing capability contributes to sustainable competitive performance through innovation and entrepreneurial culture.
Masrianto et al. (2024)	Digital marketing capability enhancement	Quantitative	Firms	Strategic utilization of digital marketing capability improves competitiveness and marketing outcomes.

Olazo (2022)	Digital marketing capability adoption	Survey	SMEs	SMEs face capability, resource, and implementation challenges in digital marketing adoption.
Bagatini et al. (2026)	CSR legitimacy skepticism	Conceptual	CSR communication	Consumers actively challenge corporate legitimacy through skepticism toward CSR initiatives.

Thematic synthesis

Theme 1: Digital Capabilities as a Double-Edged Driver, eighteen studies reveal a consistent pattern: digital marketing capabilities enhance reach, personalization, and efficiency, yet simultaneously activate consumer skepticism when perceived as artificial or manipulative. Experimental evidence confirms that AI-generated content produces significantly higher skepticism compared to human-authored communication (Acatrinei & Miu, 2025), while recent research demonstrates that digital marketing capabilities strengthen organizational performance, adaptability, and sustainable competitiveness when effectively integrated with strategic and technological resources (Apasrawirote et al., 2022; Homburg & Wielgos, 2022; Al Koliby et al., 2024). Furthermore, transparency-enhancing technologies and responsible digital communication practices reduce uncertainty and strengthen consumer trust by improving the credibility of sustainability-related information (Odoom, 2025; Zhou et al., 2023). The relationship between technological sophistication and consumer trust is therefore non-linear, moderated by the credibility of the signal being transmitted.

Theme 2: Authenticity as the Pivotal Mediating Mechanism, across thirteen studies, perceived authenticity, operationalized through transparency, consistency, and human presence, emerges as the central variable determining whether digital capabilities generate trust or skepticism (Bhaduri & Copeland, 2021; Yang & Battocchio, 2021; Walter et al., 2024). Studies on brand authenticity consistently indicate that transparent communication and value congruence strengthen consumer trust and reinforce positive brand evaluations (Södergren, 2021; Fang, 2024; Rosado-Pinto & Loureiro, 2026). Critically, the absence of authenticity reverses this effect: perceived "woke washing," exaggerated sustainability claims, and symbolic sustainability communication generate stronger negative consumer responses than the complete absence of sustainability communication, consistent with over-signaling dynamics predicted by Signaling Theory (Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Walter et al., 2024).

Theme 3: Consumer Skepticism as Structural Regulator, consumer skepticism operates simultaneously as a barrier and a structural regulatory mechanism. As a barrier, it weakens advertising effectiveness, purchase intention, and CSR impact across diverse cultural and industrial contexts (Ramasamy et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2020;

Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). Experimental and survey-based evidence further demonstrates that skepticism reduces the effectiveness of sustainability-related communication and moderates consumer responses to environmental and CSR claims (Ali et al., 2021; De Sio et al., 2022; Kim & Rim, 2024). As a regulator, skepticism discourages opportunistic sustainability communication and increases demand for transparency, functioning as a market-level control mechanism that incentivizes authentic communication (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Schade et al., 2022; Kassie & Rhee, 2023). This dual role is especially pronounced in digital environments characterized by information asymmetry and increasing consumer awareness of sustainability-related persuasion attempts (Furnham, 2024; Higueras-Castillo et al., 2024; Bagatini et al., 2026).

Theme 4: Sustainable Brand Equity as Contingent Outcome, sustainable brand equity is highly contingent upon authenticity perception rather than communication intensity or technological sophistication alone. Authentic communication enhances multiple dimensions of brand equity and strengthens long-term stakeholder relationships (Hussain et al., 2020; Bordian et al., 2023; Carbajal-Rubio et al., 2024). Sustainability-oriented practices, environmental responsibility, and consumer trust further reinforce brand equity formation across different industrial contexts (Shanti & Joshi, 2022; Aziz & Niazi, 2024; Jannah et al., 2024). Conversely, skepticism substantially erodes equity-building investments even where underlying sustainability programs are substantively sound (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2005; Khan et al., 2022). The evidence collectively suggests that sustainable brand equity functions as a contingent outcome shaped by the interaction among digital communication capability, authenticity perception, and consumer skepticism, thereby completing the recursive structure of the Technology–Authenticity Paradox.

Methodological quality assessment

Study quality was evaluated using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal framework (Aromataris & Munn, 2020), assessing validity, reliability, and contextual relevance. Results indicate that the majority of studies fall within moderate to high quality categories: 18 studies classified as high quality (predominantly SEM and experimental); 15 as moderate-high (survey-based); 9 as moderate (mixed methods, content analysis, and case study); and 6 as conceptual or review-based. Thematic synthesis followed the Thomas and Harden (2008) protocol, selected over Braun and Clarke's (2006) qualitative approach because it is specifically designed for secondary literature synthesis and accommodates heterogeneous methodological designs within a coherent conceptual integration.

Table 3. Studies based on methodological quality

Evidence Strength	JBI Score Range	No. of Studies	Dominant Method	Representative Studies
High	80–100%	18	SEM (Structural Equation Modeling), Experimental	Luo et al. (2020); Lim & Lee (2023); Walter et al. (2024); Acatrinei & Miu (2025); Kumar et al. (2025)
Moderate–High	60–79%	15	Survey (Quantitative), Regression Analysis	Ramasamy et al. (2020); Cheng et al. (2020); Khan et al. (2022); Kim & Rim (2024); Nguyen & Nguyen (2024)
Moderate	40–59%	9	Mixed Methods, Case Study, Content Analysis	Lee (2017); Bordian et al. (2023); Sitorus (2017); Schade et al. (2022); Zhou et al. (2023)
Conceptual / Review-Based	<40%	6	Systematic Review, Conceptual, Literature Review	Gorska-Warsewicz et al. (2021); Södergren (2021); Behera et al. (2024); Furnham (2024); Rosado-Pinto & Loureiro (2026)

The data analysis employed a thematic synthesis approach following Thomas and Harden (2008), which enables the identification of patterns, relationships, and conceptual convergence across heterogeneous studies. This approach was selected over Braun and Clarke's (2006) qualitative thematic analysis because it is specifically suited for synthesizing findings from secondary literature sources and facilitates the integration of diverse methodological designs into a coherent conceptual framework. The overall methodological design, combining PRISMA-based selection, JBI quality assessment, and thematic synthesis, ensures that the findings are robust, transparent, and replicable, thereby providing a strong foundation for the theoretical and practical contributions of this study.

The Technology-Authenticity Paradox Cycle

Study quality was evaluated using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal framework (Aromataris & Munn, 2020), assessing validity, reliability, and contextual relevance. Results indicate that the majority of studies fall within moderate to high quality categories: 18 studies classified as high quality (predominantly SEM and experimental); 15 as moderate-high (survey-based); 9 as moderate (mixed methods, content analysis, and case study); and 6 as conceptual or review-based. Thematic synthesis followed the Thomas and Harden (2008) protocol, selected over Braun and Clarke's (2006) qualitative approach because it is specifically designed for secondary literature synthesis and accommodates heterogeneous methodological designs within a coherent conceptual integration.



Figure 2. The Technology-Authenticity Paradox Cycle

The synthesis of 48 studies confirms that digital capabilities, perceived authenticity, consumer skepticism, and sustainable brand equity operate within a recursive and paradoxical system rather than a linear causal structure. The proposed Technology Authenticity Paradox Cycle comprises five interconnected stages: (1) digital capabilities initiate technology-enabled marketing strategies; (2) these strategies influence perceived authenticity through transparency, human presence, and communicative consistency; (3) perceived authenticity shapes consumer skepticism as a cognitive response to potential manipulation; (4) skepticism directly influences sustainable brand equity; and (5) changes in brand equity stimulate strategic reconfiguration of digital marketing capabilities, thereby reinitiating the cycle. Four moderating mechanisms transparency, ethical data use, humanization, and brand value alignment regulate the strength and direction of these relationships, while contextual contingencies including industry characteristics, consumer digital literacy, cultural context, and product involvement explain variation in paradox manifestation across firms and markets.

Table 4. Theoretical Framework

Framework	Core Focus	Limitation	Novel Contribution (This Study)
Stimulus–Organism Response (S-O-R) Model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974)	Explains how marketing stimuli influence psychological states (the organism) and elicit behavioral responses from consumers.	It does not include skepticism as a complex cognitive response and has not yet taken into account the digital context and AI-driven interactions.	Integrating consumer skepticism as the central element and digital marketing capabilities as a modern driver within the digital ecosystem.
Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973)	Explains how companies send signals to reduce information asymmetry and build trust.	Assuming the signal is received positively without taking into account skepticism or greenwashing.	Adding the dimension of authenticity versus perceived manipulation to the effectiveness of digital signals.

Framework	Core Focus	Limitation	Novel Contribution (This Study)
Attribution Theory (Kelley, 1973)	Focuses on how consumers evaluate companies' motives in marketing communications.	Limited to an evaluation of motives without taking into account the influence of digital technologies such as AI.	Expanding on AI-driven communication as a trigger for negative attribution and skepticism.
Relationship Marketing Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994)	Emphasizing the importance of trust and commitment in long-term brand–consumer relationships.	It does not explain how skepticism damages relationships in the modern digital context.	Identifying consumer skepticism as the main factor undermining relationship quality.
Customer Engagement Theory (Brodie et al., 2011)	Describing engagement as a multidimensional process (cognitive, emotional, behavioral).	Assuming engagement is a positive outcome without taking skepticism into account.	This shows that engagement can be non-linear and hindered by skepticism.
Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989)	Explaining technology adoption based on perceived usefulness and ease of use.	Failing to take into account mistrust or skepticism towards technologies such as AI marketing.	Introducing consumer skepticism as a barrier to trust formation and technology-enabled marketing communication.

Relative to prior frameworks, the Technology–Authenticity Paradox Framework advances beyond the partial explanations offered by the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) Model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973), Attribution Theory (Kelley, 1973), Relationship Marketing Theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), Customer Engagement Theory (Brodie et al., 2011), and the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989). Unlike these perspectives, which primarily explain isolated psychological, relational, or technological processes, the proposed framework integrates digital marketing capabilities, authenticity perception, consumer skepticism, and sustainable brand equity into a unified recursive model. Specifically, it extends Signaling Theory by introducing an authenticity-versus-manipulation dimension, expands Attribution Theory to incorporate technology-enabled communication and AI-mediated interactions, and reconceptualizes technology acceptance by recognizing skepticism as a critical barrier to trust formation in digitally mediated sustainability communication.

5. | DISCUSSION

The evidence confirms that digital capabilities function not as a linear competitive asset but as a double-edged resource that generates psychological resistance in the absence of authenticity as a moderating condition. This extends the Resource-Based View (RBV) by demonstrating that the strategic value of digital resources is perception-contingent: without authenticity, capabilities become a liability that triggers skepticism rather than advantage. This contrasts directly with Day's (2011) characterization of market capabilities as direct performance drivers and aligns with evidence suggesting that digital marketing capabilities generate value only when accompanied by

credibility, transparency, and consumer trust (Apasrawirote et al., 2022; Homburg & Wielgos, 2022).

The contextual applicability of the framework warrants particular attention in emerging markets. Consumers in collectivist cultural contexts, characteristic of many Southeast Asian societies, demonstrate heightened sensitivity to social consensus and peer validation in skepticism formation (Hofstede, 2001), suggesting that the consensus dimension of Kelley's (1973) attribution model may carry greater explanatory power than in individualistic Western contexts. In Indonesia specifically, the rapid growth of social commerce platforms and the prominence of influencer-driven digital ecosystems generate authenticity-signaling environments that remain underexplored in the sustainability marketing literature. Empirical testing of the Technology–Authenticity Paradox Framework in Indonesian and ASEAN contexts would substantially strengthen the framework's contextual validity while addressing an important geographic gap in existing scholarship. The framework also advances existing digital marketing capability research by demonstrating that the effectiveness of technological resources is contingent upon authenticity perception rather than technological sophistication alone, thereby linking capability-based and consumer-perception perspectives within a unified explanatory model.

Viewed through the lens of Paradox Theory, the tension between technological efficiency and authenticity-driven trust is not a problem to be eliminated but a dynamic that must be managed simultaneously. This perspective challenges the prevailing assumption that digitalization inherently contributes positively to brand equity. The findings further extend the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) by reconceptualizing consumer skepticism not merely as a defensive cognitive mechanism but as a structural regulatory variable capable of disrupting the relationship between sustainability initiatives and long-term brand value regardless of the substantive quality of those initiatives (Forehand & Grier, 2003).

In practical terms, navigating this paradox requires practitioners to move from technology-first toward human-centered digital strategies. Three principles emerge from the synthesis: (1) automation balance, involving the establishment of explicit thresholds for AI deployment that preserve the human presence underpinning authenticity perception; (2) radical transparency, treating disclosure of data usage and algorithmic processes as a prerequisite for communication credibility rather than an optional practice; and (3) authenticity auditing, involving systematic evaluations to ensure that digital capabilities remain aligned with core brand values and sustainability commitments, thereby minimizing perceptions of manipulation that erode consumer trust.

6. | CONCLUSION

This study synthesized 48 peer-reviewed studies to address three research questions concerning the relationships among digital marketing capabilities, consumer

skepticism, authenticity, and sustainable brand equity. Regarding RQ1, the findings demonstrate that digital marketing capabilities interact with consumer skepticism through a non-linear, authenticity-mediated mechanism. While digital capabilities enhance communication reach, personalization, and engagement, they may simultaneously trigger perceptions of manipulation and extrinsic motives when technological sophistication exceeds consumers' authenticity expectations. As a result, the effectiveness of digital marketing capabilities depends not only on technological resources but also on the credibility and authenticity of their implementation.

Regarding RQ2, the integration of Signaling Theory and Attribution Theory reveals that the Technology–Authenticity Paradox operates through a recursive five-stage cycle in which digital signals are continuously evaluated through consumers' attribution processes. The findings indicate that authenticity functions as the critical mechanism determining whether digital communication strengthens trust or activates skepticism, thereby influencing the long-term effectiveness of sustainability communication. This recursive process cannot be fully explained by either theory independently, highlighting the value of their integration within a unified conceptual framework.

Regarding RQ3, the synthesis identifies four strategic conditions that enable technology to function as a trust catalyst rather than a skepticism trigger: transparency in communication practices, ethical use of consumer data, alignment between sustainability claims and organizational behavior, and the preservation of human presence within digitally mediated interactions. Collectively, these conditions strengthen perceived authenticity and reduce the likelihood of adverse consumer attributions.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the development of the Technology–Authenticity Paradox Framework, which conceptualizes digital marketing capabilities, authenticity, consumer skepticism, and sustainable brand equity as components of a recursive system rather than a linear sequence of effects. The framework further advances digital marketing capability research by demonstrating that the strategic value of technological resources is contingent upon authenticity perception rather than technological sophistication alone, thereby integrating capability-based and consumer-perception perspectives within a single explanatory model.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that investments in digital technologies generate sustainable brand equity only when supported by authentic, transparent, and value-consistent communication practices. Organizations should therefore position technology as a mechanism for enhancing trust and stakeholder engagement rather than merely increasing communication efficiency or persuasive sophistication.

As a systematic literature review, this study is inherently limited by its reliance on secondary evidence and the availability of existing scholarship. Future research should empirically validate the proposed framework using quantitative approaches, particularly Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), across different industries and

cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine how emerging technologies, including generative AI, intelligent automation, and immersive digital environments, influence authenticity perception and skepticism formation over time.

Ultimately, this study positions authenticity not as a complementary marketing attribute but as the foundational condition determining whether digital transformation strengthens sustainable trust and brand equity or accelerates skepticism and brand erosion in increasingly technology-driven marketplaces.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Originality Statement

Ethical approval was obtained for this study. The manuscript represents original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration by another journal.

Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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