

Golden Arches Going Green: The Impact of Fast-Food Restaurant's Sustainability Achievements on Public Image

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the correlation between McDonald's sustainability achievements and its public image. Despite receiving criticism for its environmental and social impact, McDonald's has recently made notable progress in sustainability by setting targets to source sustainable coffee, palm oil, and fish, as well as reducing greenhouse gas emissions. By utilizing a quantitative approach involving 108 customer surveys, this study investigates the influence of McDonald's sustainability achievements on its public image. The survey results reveal that respondents who were aware of McDonald's sustainability efforts exhibited a more favorable perception of the company. This study concludes that McDonald's sustainability endeavors have contributed to its environmental and social responsibility objectives while enhancing its reputation among stakeholders. Moreover, the research findings shed light on the factors that affect sustainability perception and the public image of fast-food brands. Furthermore, it calls for future research to explore the impact of cultural factors and stakeholder perspectives on the public image of fast-food chains. The findings offer valuable insights into the potential advantages of sustainability initiatives for companies aiming to improve their public image and foster consumer trust.

Keywords: Brand Awareness; Fast-Food Chain; McDonald's; Public Image; Sustainability Development

INTRODUCTION

Considered one of the world's most famous and popular brands, McDonald's Corporation (hereafter referred to as McD) has evolved into the largest fast-food chain in recent decades. McD has demonstrated outstanding performance under its business model. In today's fast-paced world, McD serves millions of consumers daily through its extensive network of restaurants, establishing itself as one of the most recognizable and influential brands globally (Kee et al., 2021; Prada & Hurbean, 2009; Stillman, 2007). With its iconic golden arches and pervasive presence, McD has become synonymous with convenience, affordability, and fast-food culture (Bugge, 2011).

However, the issue of industrial pollution has garnered significant attention from society, both in developed and developing economies. Society's ideals have recently shifted towards emphasizing corporate social responsibility and environmental sustainability (Halkos & Nomikos, 2021). As a result of the globalization process, businesses worldwide are increasingly expected to adhere to corporate social responsibility and sustainable practices for the benefit of their stakeholders and society at large. There is a growing body of research exploring the relationship between socially responsible behavior and sustainability (Abad-Segura et al., 2019). McD's management has not been content with their achievements thus far. They have turned their attention to more significant issues and placed a focus on the world's environment—the Earth, which is vital to humanity itself. According to McD's official website, the company has taken

various sustainable actions and implemented practices that have made notable contributions to the world (McDonald's, n.d.a). These efforts, spanning different aspects and fields, have attracted public attention and have been acknowledged by academia, as evidenced by their frequent mention in related studies (Reddy et al., 2022). Examples of these core initiatives include sustainable packaging, recycling and waste reduction, and sustainable beef commitment (Raj & Singh, 2021; Kee et al., 2019; Prince, 1992).

The impact of sustainability achievements is significant for businesses, as Garavan and McGuire (2010) have argued that sustainable practices can enhance a company's public image as a socially responsible business. Such practices also align with a business's internal mission and values, aiding in self-improvement. Understanding the relationship between sustainability achievements and public image is therefore crucial for businesses seeking success in a highly competitive market, where public perceptions can make or break a brand (Hung, 2008). Thus, this study aims to explore the impact on the company's public image. The authors seek to understand the extent to which sustainable practices contribute to strengthening or altering the overall image of the brand by analyzing McD's sustainability achievements and examining their corresponding impact on the company's public image.

The significance of this study lies in its potential contribution to the understanding of sustainability within the fast-food industry and its advancement of academic research and real-world business strategies. It deepens awareness of sustainability within the fast-food industry, an area that has been extensively investigated due to its environmental effects. Furthermore, it provides valuable insights for leveraging sustainability achievements to enhance brand loyalty and public image for companies in the fast-food industry. The structure of this paper aims to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of how McD's sustainability achievements have influenced its public image. Subsequent sections delve into the research methodology employed, review relevant literature on sustainability and public image, present and analyze McD's sustainability achievements, examine how these achievements have affected public perception of the company through various media channels, and conclude with implications for theory and recommendations for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and Conceptualization of Sustainability

Sustainability in the business context is understood differently and involves ongoing and stable improvement of performance in economic, ecological, and social dimensions (Lankoski, 2016; Figge et al., 2002). It also encompasses environmentally friendly practices that safeguard the Earth's ecosystem while maximizing corporate value (Milne & Gray, 2013). Environmental issues, including climate change and the threat to global food security, have prompted food manufacturers, including fast-food establishments, to implement measures aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These measures include employing natural resources, reducing food waste, engaging in social volunteer initiatives, and adopting technological innovations such as AI, Big Data, IoT, Blockchain, Robotics, and smart machines to prevent waste, combat fraud, and maintain food quality (Marvin et al., 2020, 2022; Rejeb et al., 2022; Marvin & Bouzembrak, 2020; Jin et al., 2020; Bouzembrak et al., 2019).

The Relationship Between Sustainability and Public Image

The consumer's perception of a company, shaped by experiences and interactions, constitutes its public or brand image (Eads & Gafner, 2023). The mission and values of a company also influence how consumers perceive its public image. A strong and positive public image plays a vital role in establishing brand recognition, making a

favorable impression, generating referrals, and fostering a sense of professionalism. Consequently, this contributes to the growth of a loyal customer base.

In today's consumer landscape, there is a growing interest in understanding how brands manufacture their products (Javed, 2022). Consumers feel entitled to knowledge about the product's processing, such as the ingredients used, as they are the ultimate consumers. Furthermore, people, particularly younger generations, are more knowledgeable about sustainability and its significance. As a result, many companies are integrating sustainability considerations into their decision-making processes to minimize their environmental impact and create a positive impression among consumers. By incorporating sustainability practices into their operations, brands can cultivate a positive public image, particularly among environmentally conscious consumers, thus increasing their customer base and enhancing brand recognition (Song et al., 2022; Romprasert & Trivedi, 2021). Consequently, this can lead to higher sales revenue and greater market reach.

For instance, fast-food industry giant McD demonstrates its commitment to environmental issues by sharing information and initiatives related to sustainability and the SDGs on its official website (McDonald's Corporation, n.d.a). They also publish their Sustainability Report for public reference (McDonald's Japan Editorial Team, 2023). These actions demonstrate their support for environmental protection and contribute to shaping a positive brand image in the eyes of consumers.

McD Sustainability Initiatives and Achievements

McD Corporation, a prominent American fast-food chain, has acknowledged the significance of sustainability in its growth strategy and global supply chain management, despite facing criticism regarding the health implications of its products (Reuter et al., 2019). Sustainability encompasses environmentally friendly diets, biodiversity conservation, and the optimization of resources in the food processing industry (Springmann et al., 2016). McD actively supports the United Nations' SDGs, with initiatives aligned to SDG 4, such as the "Archways to Opportunity" education program in the United States (McDonald's Corporation, n.d.b). This program has granted over \$165 million in college tuition assistance to 55,000 employees by the end of 2021, emphasizing inclusive and equitable quality education (McDonald's Corporation, n.d.e). The company also addresses employment barriers for young people through the Youth Opportunity program and actively engages in charitable events.

Promoting safe and respectful working environments aligns McD's with SDG 8, emphasizing sustainable economic growth and decent work conditions (United Nations, n.d.b). Measures include protecting employees' physical and mental health, ensuring workplace safety, addressing harassment and discrimination, and offering fair compensation. To address environmental concerns, McD aligns with SDG 12, focusing on sustainable consumption and production patterns (United Nations, n.d.c). The company reduces the use of non-recyclable materials in packaging and actively participates in initiatives to reduce plastic waste in collaboration with organizations like the World Wildlife Fund and the Plastics Recovery Group (McDonald's Corporation, n.d.d). McD also collaborates on sustainable beef practices through the Global Roundtable for Sustainable Beef and recognizes producers leading in sustainable practices. Within its supply chain, McD implements policies and activities to achieve sustainability goals. For instance, the company ensures deforestation-free soy sourcing for chicken feed (McDonald's Corporation, n.d.c). Additionally, McD is formulating policies to source coffee exclusively from high-deforestation-risk areas certified by the Rainforest Alliance. Regarding climate change, McD aligns with SDG 13 and collaborates with stakeholders to combat it (United Nations, n.d.a). The company aims

to reduce greenhouse gas emissions associated with its restaurants and operations by 36% by 2030 and achieve a 31% reduction in emissions intensity across its supply chain, both based on 2015 baselines (McDonald's Corporation, n.d.b).

The Impact of McD Sustainability Achievements on Public Image

Initially, McD gained popularity as a family-oriented restaurant offering affordable food, entertainment, and flavors that appealed to both children and adults (McDonald's, n.d.b). During this period, McD's public image revolved around joy, love, youth, and family values. However, with its sustainability achievements, McD has been able to enhance its public image and attract customers who prioritize sustainability considerations. Today, there is a heightened awareness of the importance of protecting the ecosystem and a growing familiarity with the SDGs. As a result, people now place greater emphasis on sustainability when consuming fast food from McD.

McD has implemented numerous sustainability measures that have contributed to enhancing its reputation and demonstrating its commitment to environmental and social responsibility. Through sustainability reporting, McD has improved public perception by showcasing its transparency and accountability in disclosing the company's objectives and outcomes related to environmental and social impacts. By openly discussing its sustainability achievements and challenges, McD establishes trust with stakeholders and instills confidence. These sustainability initiatives position McD as a more environmentally conscious and socially responsible company, appealing to customers who prioritize these values when making purchasing decisions.

Challenges and Criticisms in Sustainable Practices of Fast-Food Chains

Although the sustainability initiatives undertaken by McD and other fast-food chains are commendable and seemingly positive, there are numerous challenges and criticisms associated with these efforts. One of the primary challenges faced by fast-food brands is the issue of cost. These establishments generate significant amounts of packaging waste, including single-use utensils and containers. Despite attempts to offer more environmentally friendly packaging alternatives, finding economically viable options remains challenging. Ensuring efficient waste management and recycling processes throughout the entire supply chain can also prove to be difficult.

Another challenge arises from the complex global supply chains upon which fast-food chains rely (Cohan & Singh, 2017). Ensuring sustainable sourcing practices, including addressing concerns related to deforestation, labor rights, and animal welfare, necessitates close coordination with suppliers. Continuous monitoring of potential issues is also necessary. Additionally, fast-food chains operate many restaurants, which consume substantial amounts of energy and contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. Despite efforts to improve energy efficiency and reduce emissions, implementing sustainable practices across such a vast network of restaurants remains challenging.

Health and nutrition concerns present another hurdle. Fast-food restaurants often face criticism for offering calorie-dense and unhealthy food choices that contribute to conditions like obesity and diabetes. Balancing sustainability initiatives with the demand for healthier menu options can be challenging, as sustainability objectives may conflict with nutrition and health goals. Furthermore, shifting consumer preferences and behaviors towards sustainable solutions can be difficult for fast-food restaurants. The adoption of sustainable and healthy food options may be limited by cost considerations and deeply ingrained consumer behaviors, despite the growing demand for such choices. Navigating this consumer landscape is a challenge for fast-food chains as they strive to promote sustainable practices.

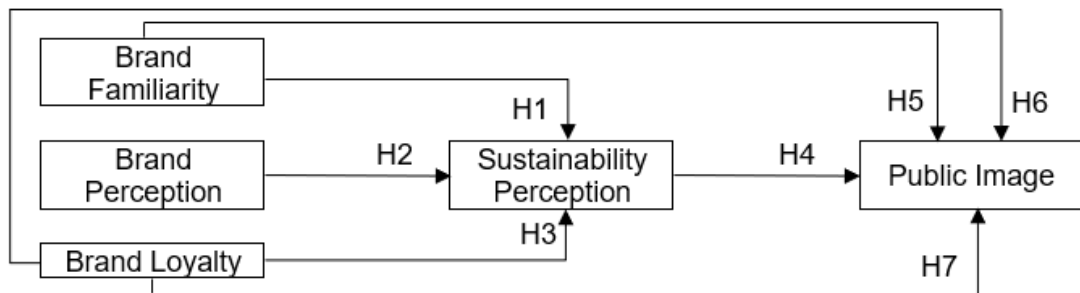
Finally, the issue of "greenwashing" needs to be addressed (Jane, n.d.). Detractors argue that fast-food restaurants often exaggerate or make false claims about their sustainability practices in order to appear more environmentally friendly than they are. To gain the trust of customers and stakeholders, fast-food businesses must ensure that their sustainability efforts are genuine and supported by transparent reporting. Building and maintaining credibility in sustainability practices is crucial for fast-food chains.

Gaps in the Existing Literature

The existing research on the impact of sustainability achievements on public image in the fast-food industry has several gaps that warrant further exploration. Previous literature reviews have not extensively examined this topic, as it was commonly assumed that customers did not prioritize the sustainability aspect of brands. Additionally, many fast-food brands have not placed significant emphasis on their sustainability efforts. Therefore, further investigation into this area is necessary. Considering these gaps, the authors have developed a research model and formulated several hypotheses as follows:

- H1: The sustainability perception will act as a mediator in the relationship between brand familiarity and public image.
- H2: The sustainability perception will act as a mediator in the relationship between brand perception and public image.
- H3: The sustainability perception will act as a mediator in the relationship between brand loyalty and public image.
- H4: The sustainability perception will have a positive association with public image.
- H5: Brand familiarity will have a positive association with public image.
- H6: Brand perception will have a positive association with public image.
- H7: Brand loyalty will have a positive association with public image.

Figure 1. The Research Model



The hypotheses in Figure 1 form the basis of the research model proposed by the authors and provide a framework for investigating the relationships between sustainability perception, brand familiarity, brand perception, brand loyalty, and public image in the fast-food industry.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research designs. The qualitative component involved inductive reasoning, using observations and document analysis to understand factors contributing to McD's positive public image. Formalizing research issues, conducting a literature review, and formulating hypotheses followed this phase. Quantitative data was collected through a survey questionnaire distributed on social media platforms (Telegram, WhatsApp, Instagram). This digital survey method allowed convenient and safe participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. A representative sample of consumers was selected using

stratified random sampling techniques to ensure diversity. Duplicate responses were prevented, and 108 valid responses were collected. Informed consent and data confidentiality were assured.

The questionnaire consisted of sections on demographic information, brand awareness, sustainability perception, and public image of McD. Likert scale responses (1-5) measured agreement levels. Pre-testing ensured question clarity and reliability. Research findings were interpreted in line with objectives and presented using tables. SPSS 27 was used to analyze the collected data for significance and reliability. Limitations include response biases from self-reported perceptions and potential influences on public perception beyond sustainability. The digital survey method limited direct probing and follow-up questions. Efforts were made to ensure clear questions, but interpretation variations and comprehension difficulties could affect results. The researchers addressed these challenges by designing straightforward questions.

RESULTS

Table 1. Respondents' Profile Summary (N=108)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	57	52.78
Male	51	47.22
Age Group		
18 – 24	92	85.19
25 – 34	12	11.11
35 – 44	3	2.78
44 – 54	1	0.93
Educational Level		
High school diploma or equivalent	14	12.96
Bachelor's degree	85	78.7
Master's degree	8	7.41
Other	1	0.93
Employment Status		
Full time	22	20.37
Part-time	9	8.33
Self-employed	4	3.7
Unemployed	73	67.59
Annual Income		
Less than RM25,000	99	91.67
RM25,001 – RM50,000	1	0.93
RM50,001 – RM100,000	5	4.63
RM100,001 – RM200,000	2	1.85

Table 1 shows that 52.78% (N=57) of the respondents are females, and 47.22% (N=51) are males. Most respondents (N=92, 85.19%) are from the age group of 18-24, while none are under the age group of 55 and above (N=0, 0.00%). From the educational level, most respondents have a bachelor's degree qualification (N=85, 78.70%). The authors suppose the distribution of online survey forms causes this situation, as the authors treat the university as a starting point to distribute and spread it to the public. Such a deduction is relevant as it can be reflected in the employment status data. As the authors defined the students as part of the "unemployed" category, it is pertinent that most respondents are unemployed (N=73, 67.59%). Besides, it can be proven by the annual income data as students usually have a lower salary or zero salaries, which had been reflected in the

data stating that majority of the respondents have less than RM25,000 annual income (N=99, 91.67%).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's Coefficients Alpha, and Zero-order Correlations for all study variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Brand Familiarity	0.834				
2. Brand Perception	0.686**	0.897			
3. Brand Loyalty	0.654**	0.690**	0.895		
4. Sustainability Perception	0.518**	0.669**	0.789**	0.938	
5. Public image	0.507**	0.654**	0.757**	0.855**	0.931
Number of items	5	5	5	5	5
Mean	4.4111	4.2093	4.1074	4.063	4.1574
Standard deviation	0.64581	0.67277	0.81822	0.76398	0.70885

Note: N = 108; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. The diagonal entries represent Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics, measures of reliability, and zero-order correlations among the study variables. All tested variables demonstrate high levels of reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.83 to 0.94.

Table 3. Regression analysis

Variables	Public Image	Sustainability Perception
1. Brand Familiarity	-0.028	-0.114
2. Brand Perception	0.109	.289***
3. Brand Loyalty	0.189*	.664***
4. Sustainability Perception	0.648***	
R ²	0.745	0.648
F value	79.141	66.592
Durbin-Watson Statistic	1.89	2.27

Note: N = 108; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

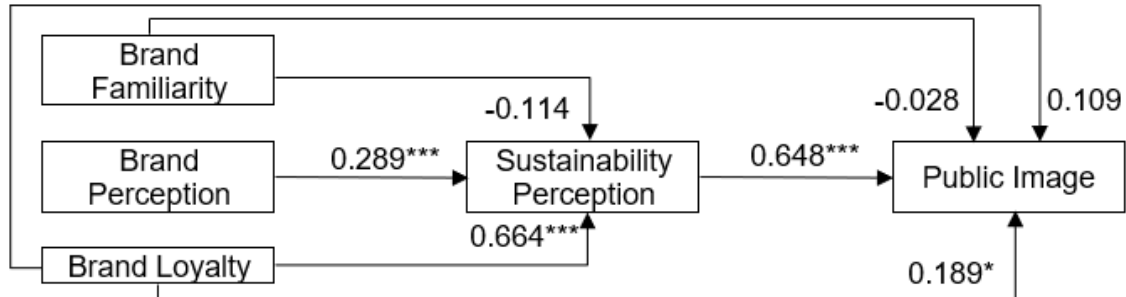
The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 3, examining the relationship between the public image of McD and several independent variables: brand familiarity of McD, brand perception of McD, brand loyalty of McD, and sustainability perception of McD. The findings support hypotheses H4 and H7, indicating positive associations between the public image of McD and brand loyalty of McD, as well as sustainability perception of McD. The R² value of 0.745 suggests that 74.50% of the variance in the public image of McD can be explained by brand loyalty of McD and sustainability perception of McD.

Among these variables, sustainability perception of McD exhibits the highest beta value of .648, indicating the most significant influence on the public image of McD. The remaining variable, brand loyalty of McD, shows a beta value of 0.189. However, brand familiarity of McD and brand perception of McD do not demonstrate a significant effect on the public image of McD, leading to the rejection of hypotheses H5 and H6.

Additionally, the analysis reveals that brand perception of McD and brand loyalty of McD can indirectly influence the public image of McD through the mediating role of sustainability perception of McD. Hypotheses H2 and H3 are supported, as the dependent variable (sustainability perception of McD) and these two independent variables (brand familiarity of McD and brand perception of McD) exhibit positive relationships. Brand loyalty of McD exerts the strongest influence on the public image of McD (beta value = 0.664), followed by brand perception of McD (beta value = 0.289).

Notably, brand familiarity of McD does not demonstrate a significant relationship with sustainability perception of McD, resulting in the rejection of hypothesis H1. The summarized output of the hypothesized model is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Hypothesized Model



DISCUSSION

This study examined various factors that influence the public image of McD. The research findings indicate that brand loyalty plays a significant role in shaping the public image of McD. Brand loyalty directly affects the public perception of McD, alongside brand perception. Sustainability perception of McD acts as an intermediary variable in this relationship. Therefore, this study establishes that brand perception, brand loyalty, and sustainability perception all have a direct or indirect impact on the public image of McD. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that the model proposed in this study effectively explains the factors influencing the public image of McD. Among these factors, brand perception and brand loyalty of McD emerge as the two significant factors affecting the public image of McD.

Upon comparing the antecedents of sustainability perception at McD, it becomes apparent that brand loyalty is the most influential factor in shaping sustainability perception. Among the factors influencing the public image of McD, brand loyalty stands out as the most significant determinant. This can be attributed to the fact that loyal customers tend to have a stronger and more extensive relationship with the brand (Brown & Dacin, 1997). A study by Luchs et al. (2010) found that customers who identified as loyal to a brand were more likely to perceive the brand as socially responsible and environmentally friendly. Besides, loyal customers actively seek information about the brand, follow its activities, and engage in its initiatives (Henard & Dacin, 2010). Consequently, loyal customers possess greater knowledge about McD's sustainability efforts, such as waste reduction, responsible sourcing, and environmental support (Harring et al., 2017). As a result, they develop positive perceptions regarding McD's sustainability practices (Brown & Dacin, 1997).

The second most crucial factor affecting sustainability perception at McD is brand perception. Consumers' overall perception of McD shapes their views on various aspects, including sustainability (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). When consumers have a positive perception of McD, they are more inclined to associate positive characteristics and values with the brand, including its commitment to sustainability. For example, if consumers perceive McD as innovative, ethical, or socially conscious, they are more likely to believe in the brand's genuine dedication to sustainable practices. Conversely, negative brand perceptions may lead to skepticism or a lack of association between the brand and sustainability (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Notably, the impact of brand perception on sustainability perceptions is supported by various studies. For instance, Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibáñez (2012) showed that consumers' perceptions of a brand's

corporate social responsibility activities influenced their perceptions of the brand's environmental responsibility.

Furthermore, it is evident from the findings that brand loyalty of McD can directly impact its public image, even without the mediating effect of sustainability perception. Loyal customers act as brand advocates, engaging in positive word-of-mouth recommendations and actively supporting the brand (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Their loyalty and positive experiences contribute to a favorable image of McD in the eyes of the public (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). When others observe the loyalty and positive experiences of existing customers, it influences their perception of McD as a trustworthy, reliable, and high-quality brand (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

Lastly, sustainability perception at McD is a significant factor that directly influences its public image. The way McD is perceived regarding sustainability plays a crucial role in shaping its public image (Aaker & Equity, 1991). Consumers, stakeholders, and the general public increasingly value sustainability and corporate social responsibility (Du et al., 2007). When McD is perceived as genuinely committed to sustainability, it enhances its reputation and public image (Klein & Dawar, 2004). Sustainability initiatives demonstrate the brand's awareness and efforts to address environmental and social challenges, which are valued by consumers (Du et al., 2007). Positive sustainability perception can create a halo effect, leading the public to view McD more favorably in other aspects as well (Klein & Dawar, 2004; Keller, 1993). On the other hand, in terms of addressing the United Nation's SDGs, sustainable initiatives are compulsory. For example, to address the United Nations' SDGs number 12: sustainable consumption and production, food loss and waste management systems are one of the methods to make it (Lemaire & Limbourg, 2019). As Shanklin et al. (1991) pointed out, a positive public image is a factor that has the most influence on a decision to start a waste management system. Meanwhile, waste management could effectively improve a company's public image and reduce environmental impacts simultaneously (Tiwari & Nagarathna, 2017; Kumar, 2005; Ling & Lim, 2002). By that, the authors conclude that there is a close relationship between sustainability initiatives and public image and believe this is similar to be applied in the fast-food industry.

It is aligned with the literature reviews, where sustainability perceptions have an impact on the public image of a corporation. However, further research needs to be done, especially on the fast-food industry, because there is always a stereotype claiming that the factors influencing the public image of a fast-food brand are its convenience, affordability, and other similar related factors rather than sustainable practices or achievements (Cao & Kim, 2015; Kim et al., 2009; Heung et al., 2000). Why does this stereotype exist? To further understand, the convenience of a fast-food chain usually refers to the number of shops and the speed of how they serve the food, which is also referred to as availability (Jekanowski et al., 2001). These sub-factors allow the public to get McD products easily and obtain good service. Meanwhile, affordability is related to the price of McD products, whether it is affordable by people from different layers of society. Thus, it is reasonable why such a stereotype exists in the fast-food industry and so on McD.

This research suggests that the sustainability perceptions of McD, which represents the fast-food chain industry, are also factors affecting its public image. It expresses a message that the public is aware of the importance of sustainable development even in evaluating a fast-food chain industry, treating it as a standard to evaluate a company (Otto et al., 2022). This indicates the government and society did try to increase public awareness of sustainability development by various methods, such as introducing new policies, forming organizations for publicizing, etc. For instance, the government has

introduced the National Green Technology Policy (2009) to promote public awareness of green technology (Sin et al., 2011). The effort paid by Malaysian public sector is also unignorable such as Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), a distinguished public university pursuing sustainability in the communities on and off campus through pedagogical and academic activities (Campbell, 2014). The public has also spontaneously founded the Environmental Protection Society Malaysia (EPSM) to regulate the movements that may give rise to environmental issues (Aiken & Leigh, 1988); has formed the Malaysia Environmental NGOs (MENGO) to protect environment and advance the cause locally, nationally, and internationally (Hashim et al., 2010); and has incorporated the Treat Every Environment Special Limited Company (TRESS) aims to educate university students and public about the value of preserving the environment (Islam et al., 2010). Apart from that, Ho (2016) mentioned that raising public awareness of environmental problems is an effective way to promote public participation in sustainability development.

Nevertheless, the fact that promotions of sustainability development are all focusing on the keyword environment makes the authors believe it will indirectly send the wrong information to the public, making them think sustainability simply means protecting the environment. Sustainability development within the fast-food industry is not only about the environment but also about sustainable food supply chains, sustainable packaging, etc. It can be compared to the UK Sustainable Development Commission's suggestion that a sustainable food supply chain combines safety, transparency, localization, land management, reduced energy consumption, enhanced social and animal welfare, and more efficient resource management (Smith, 2008). A successful example is that the food industry supply chain became sustainable through operations research (OR) techniques, enlightened by the progress of Supply Chain Management (SCM), in terms of achieving economic, environmental, and social sustainability (Zhu et al., 2018; Bloemhof & Soysal, 2017; Chopra & Meindl, 2012).

Overall, the relationship between brand loyalty, sustainability perceptions, public image, and brand perception is interconnected. Loyal customers who have positive perceptions of the brand are more likely to develop positive sustainability perceptions, contributing to a positive public image. McD's commitment to sustainability enhances its reputation and public image, further strengthening brand loyalty and perception. These factors combine to create a positive cycle that reinforces McD's position as a socially responsible and sustainable brand.

Research Implications

The implications of this research are significant for understanding the factors that influence the public image of McD and have broader implications for the fast-food industry. The study highlights the crucial role of brand loyalty in shaping the public perception of McD. Loyal customers, who actively engage in positive word-of-mouth recommendations, contribute to a favorable public image. This finding underscores the importance of fostering brand loyalty as a means to enhance the overall perception of a company. Additionally, the research emphasizes the influence of sustainability perception on the public image of McD. When consumers perceive McD as genuinely committed to sustainability, it positively impacts the brand's reputation and public image. This highlights the growing significance of incorporating sustainable practices and effectively communicating them to consumers to improve their perception of a company.

The study also reveals the interconnection between brand perception and sustainability perception. Positive brand perceptions, such as perceiving McD as innovative or socially conscious, increase the likelihood of associating the brand with sustainable practices. To enhance sustainability perceptions and, subsequently, improve the public image,

companies should strive to create positive brand perceptions. Furthermore, the research challenges the stereotype that factors influencing the public image of a fast-food brand are solely related to convenience and affordability. It suggests that sustainability perceptions play a significant role in shaping the public image of fast-food chains. Companies in the industry should recognize the changing values of consumers and incorporate sustainable practices to positively influence their public image. The findings also highlight the need for balanced sustainability messaging. While environmental sustainability is crucial, companies should educate the public about other aspects, such as sustainable food supply chains and packaging. By broadening the understanding of sustainability beyond the environment, companies can promote holistic approaches to sustainable development.

Overall, this research provides insights for companies in the fast-food industry to prioritize brand loyalty and sustainability perceptions in shaping their public image. It emphasizes the importance of consistent efforts towards sustainability and effective communication of those initiatives. By doing so, companies can reinforce a positive cycle, strengthening brand loyalty, sustainability perceptions, and public image, ultimately positioning themselves as socially responsible and sustainable brands.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research has illuminated a multifaceted understanding of the factors that wield considerable influence over the public image of McD, transcending the boundaries of fast-food industry analysis. The findings underscore the pivotal role of brand loyalty as a cornerstone in melding the public's perception of McD. This underscores the paramount importance of nurturing and cultivating a community of devoted patrons who not only patronize the brand but also actively vouch for and promote it. Moreover, the research has drawn attention to the pervasive influence of sustainability perception on McD's public image. This finding underscores the imperative for businesses, not only in the fast-food sector but across industries, to accord a high priority to sustainable practices while also ensuring effective communication of these initiatives to consumers.

One of the most intriguing takeaways from this study is the disruption of the long-held stereotype that convenience and affordability alone determine the public image of fast-food brands. It's become increasingly evident that sustainability perceptions have ascended in importance, reshaping the consumer landscape and McD's image along with it. The fast-food industry is undergoing a significant transformation, driven by the shifting values of consumers who are increasingly mindful of the environmental and social impact of their choices. Therefore, companies within this industry must exhibit an acute awareness of these evolving consumer values and respond with agile strategies that prioritize sustainability. The implications of the research extend far beyond the golden arches, offering invaluable insights for all players in the fast-food sector. By nurturing and strengthening brand loyalty while adeptly communicating sustainability initiatives, companies can set in motion a virtuous cycle that cements their reputation as socially responsible and sustainable brands. Nevertheless, it is imperative for companies to exercise caution in crafting their sustainability messaging. Sustainability must be seen in a holistic light, encompassing not only environmental considerations but also sustainable food supply chains, ethical sourcing, and responsible packaging practices. This comprehensive approach aligns with the nuanced and evolving expectations of today's consumers.

Considering the findings, these factors: brand loyalty, sustainability perceptions, and public image are interconnected in a complex web. Successful companies will be those that grasp the intricate dynamics at play and strategically harness them to sculpt their public image. By doing so, they not only enhance their reputation but also establish themselves as industry leaders in sustainability, a quality that is increasingly held in high regard by consumers. Beyond the scope of fast food, this research underscores the broader consumer sentiment. In an era where corporate social responsibility and sustainability have moved to the forefront of public consciousness, businesses in all sectors must be attuned to these shifting values. Failure to do so could leave them vulnerable to changes in public perception that can have far-reaching consequences.

In conclusion, this research serves as a beacon, illuminating the path forward for businesses, not just in the fast-food industry, but across all sectors. It demonstrates that brand loyalty and sustainability are not mere buzzwords but potent tools that can be harnessed to shape public image and drive success. As the landscape of consumer values continues to evolve, those who adapt and align their strategies accordingly will emerge as the true leaders in their respective fields, steering their brands toward a future defined by sustainability and loyalty.

LIMITATION

The present research has several limitations. The small sample size of mainly young respondents with similar backgrounds limits the generalizability of findings. Future research should include a diverse sample encompassing various demographic segments. The reliance on self-reported online survey data introduces biases. Combining surveys with qualitative interviews or observations would provide deeper insights. The study focused only on McD in the fast-food industry, hindering broader conclusions. Exploring other chains and industries could help compare findings. Additionally, incorporating variables like customer satisfaction and social media presence would enhance understanding. Including the perspectives of employees, franchise owners, and community members would provide a holistic view. Lastly, the study was conducted in Malaysia, necessitating cross-cultural studies. Despite these limitations, addressing them in future studies can yield a deeper understanding of the dynamics influencing the public image of fast-food brands.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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