

Greener Labels, Stronger Bonds: Driving Engagement and Value Co-Creation Through Retailers' Sustainability and Sustainable Development Goals Alignment

Abstract

Purpose – The present study explores consumers' perceptions of retailers' corporate image, focusing on corporate social responsibility, climate change engagement, and sustainability initiatives such as the adoption of recyclable packaging and efforts to reduce carbon footprints and CO₂ emissions.

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory research approach was employed to gain deeper insights into consumers' perceptions of retailers' corporate image and sustainability practices. The study involved six focus group discussions conducted with a total of 33 consumers of private label brands.

Findings – The research reveals that customers actively seek information about private label brand product ingredients, sourcing, production processes (such as fair-trade practices and the treatment of producers and employees), as well as the retailer's sustainability initiatives, including recyclable packaging and efforts to reduce carbon footprints and CO₂ emissions. Further, customers' sustainability impacts their value co-creation behaviour and overall retail engagement.

Originality/value – This study is among the first to qualitatively examine how retailers' sustainability initiatives and alignment with UN SDG12 and SDG8 influence customer engagement and value co-creation in the private label brand context. Unlike prior research, which treated these concepts separately, it provides an integrated view of how sustainability narratives, ethical sourcing, corporate social responsibility, and eco-friendly practices foster deeper customer engagement. The findings show that sustainability cues prompt both active and passive co-creative behaviours, including advocacy, feedback, and eco-conscious participation. A conceptual model is proposed to illustrate the dynamic relationship between sustainability, engagement, and value co-creation, highlighting the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions that shape consumer participation.

Keywords: Value co-creation, customer engagement, private label brands, sustainability, climate change engagement

Paper type: Research article

Introduction

Supermarkets play a central role in shaping consumer behaviour and market dynamics, with private label brands (PLBs) increasingly used to meet evolving consumer expectations for quality, value, and sustainability (Mookherjee *et al.*, 2024). In the UK, supermarkets continue to maintain their relevance amid economic and social changes, with recent data from NielsenIQ showing a notable increase in total till sales in early 2025, up from growth recorded in the preceding months (NielsenIQ, 2025). Beyond pricing and product innovation, retailers are aligning their PLB strategies with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG13 (Climate Action), and SDG17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Initiatives include reducing carbon emissions, minimising plastic usage, cutting food waste, and promoting consumer behaviours such as recycling and reusing (Tesco.co.uk, 2024; Sainsburys.co.uk, 2024). This commitment is especially timely, given that climate change, as defined by the United Nations, is a long-term shift in temperature and weather patterns primarily driven by human activity and fossil fuel consumption and remains one of the most urgent global challenges (UN, 2024). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) positions retailers as critical agents in driving sustainability across supply chains and shaping consumer behaviours. To this end, UNEP provides guidance and training on environmental and social impact management, encouraging practices such as supply chain greening, sustainable product adoption, take-back schemes, and reusable packaging initiatives (UNEP, 2024).

Traditionally regarded as cost-effective substitutes for manufacturer brands, PLBs are increasingly evolving into strategic platforms through which retailers advance their sustainability commitments and green marketing practices. In addition to affordability, these brands are being repositioned as enablers of innovation in areas such as ethical sourcing, carbon footprint reduction, circular packaging, and responsible supply chain management (NielsenIQ, 2024). By embedding sustainability within their brand strategies, retailers respond not only to regulatory pressures and global calls for climate action but also to shifting consumer expectations that they act as visible agents of environmental and social change (Tesco, 2025). This shift highlights how climate change is no longer perceived solely as an environmental crisis but is also viewed as a strategic marketing imperative with reputational consequences. In this context, PLBs function as a bridge between sustainability agendas and consumer values, fostering trust and loyalty through tangible green initiatives. These dynamics intersect with broader academic discussions on value co-creation and customer engagement, which offer useful lenses for analysing how consumers interact with sustainability-driven retail strategies (Palakshappa and Dodds, 2021). Value co-creation emphasises the collaborative processes through which value emerges jointly between firms and consumers (Yi and Gong, 2013), while customer engagement captures the psychological state arising from meaningful, often technology-enabled, brand interactions (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). In the context of sustainable PLBs, these dynamics are amplified: consumers do not merely purchase products but actively participate in sustainability discourses through behaviours such as sharing feedback, storytelling, and adopting environmentally responsible practices (Islam *et al.*, 2025). Digital technologies further accelerate this process, enabling consumers to voice expectations, co-create sustainability initiatives, and hold retailers accountable. Consequently, sustainability becomes both a catalyst and a context for value co-creation and engagement, positioning PLBs as critical platforms where climate-conscious consumer behaviour, green marketing, and retailer responsibility converge (Sharma *et al.*, 2025).

Although previous research acknowledges that sustainability can foster engagement and co-creation (Khan and Fatma, 2023), there is still limited insight into how these processes unfold in PLB contexts. Moreover, prior studies have rarely integrated climate-change conscious behaviours with value co-creation, leaving a gap in understanding how environmentally engaged consumers translate sustainability cues into active co-creation practices (Liyanaarachchi *et al.*, 2025). In particular, there is limited empirical evidence on how consumers perceive, interpret, and respond to retailers' sustainability initiatives, despite these being central to marketing practice and climate change discourse (Raghavendra *et al.*, 2024; Szaban *et al.*, 2025). This lack of understanding constrains retailers' ability to design effective green strategies and to communicate them in ways that resonate with environmentally conscious consumers (Terán-Yépez *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, much of the existing research relies on quantitative methods, which, while valuable, often overlook the nuanced emotional and cognitive mechanisms that shape consumer reactions to sustainability cues (Ang *et al.*, 2024). Qualitative approaches, by contrast, can capture these deeper motivations and provide richer insight into how engagement and co-creation unfold in sustainable retail contexts (Mehta and Handriana, 2024).

Despite the extensive attention customer engagement and value co-creation have received in marketing literature, their integration with sustainability remains underexplored. In particular, little is known about how consumers actively participate in sustainability initiatives through practices such as resource integration and feedback provision, or how their engagement with climate change translates into co-creation with retailers (Köcher *et al.*, 2025). Addressing these gaps is critical not only for advancing academic debates but also for informing more authentic sustainability communications and for strengthening the co-created value between consumers and firms (Verma *et al.*, 2023). This focus also provides important theoretical contributions by connecting sustainability, UN SDG alignment (SDG12 and SDG8), and value co-creation in an integrated framework, while offering practical guidance for retailers seeking to design meaningful sustainability strategies that resonate with environmentally conscious consumers.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the dynamics of value co-creation among environmentally conscious or climate-engaged consumers, exploring how engagement is formed, expressed, and sustained in response to retailers' sustainability initiatives. The primary research problem addressed is the limited understanding of how consumers perceive and interact with sustainability-driven strategies in the context of PLBs and how these perceptions influence their engagement and co-creation behaviours.

The research objectives are twofold: first, to examine how PLB consumers articulate the influence of retailers' sustainability initiatives on their value co-creation behaviours and engagement, and second, to investigate how consumers' engagement with climate change shapes their value co-creation practices and interactions with retailers. In line with these objectives, the study addresses two key research questions:

RQ1: How do PLB consumers articulate the influence of sustainability on their value co-creation behaviours and engagement with retailers?

RQ2: How does consumers' engagement with climate change shape their value co-creation practices and interactions with retailers?

By addressing these objectives and research questions, the study contributes novel empirical evidence that deepens theoretical understanding by demonstrating how sustainability serves as a meaningful antecedent to value co-creation behaviour and PLB engagement while also providing actionable insights for retailers seeking to design sustainability-aligned strategies that genuinely engage climate-conscious consumers. Furthermore, the study extends existing frameworks of customer engagement and value co-creation by integrating perspectives from sustainability marketing, brand attachment, and co-creation. Finally, it proposes a conceptual model grounded in sustainability orientation and engagement intensity, delivering practical segmentation insights for retailers and establishing a foundation for future research.

The article continues with a review of the existing literature, outlining the factors identified as antecedents of value co-creation and customer engagement with PLBs. It then details the methodology used for data collection and analysis, followed by a presentation of the thematic analysis results. The study concludes by discussing the theoretical and managerial implications, identifying future research directions, and acknowledging limitations.

Theoretical Foundation and Literature Review

Private Label Brands and Consumer Perceptions - PLBs, once perceived primarily as lower-cost or inferior alternatives to national brands, have undergone a significant transformation in both definition and consumer perception. Early conceptualisations defined PLBs largely in terms of their distributional role and price-based positioning (Schutte, 1969; Riboldazzi *et al.*, 2021), with Dhar and Hoch (1996) emphasising that retailers assume full responsibility for product development, sourcing, warehousing, merchandising, and marketing. Kumar and Steenkamp (2007, p. 9) offered a fundamental perspective, defining PLBs as “merchandise produced and sold by a specific retailer or chain of retail stores.” For this study, PLBs are broadly understood as products owned, produced, and sold exclusively by or for a specific retailer or retail chain, with retailers holding full responsibility for all aspects of brand management (Kumar and Steenkamp, 2007; Hoskins *et al.*, 2024).

Over time, consumer perceptions of PLBs have evolved: while initially regarded as low-quality substitutes, they are now recognised for their value, trust, and quality (Steenkamp, 2024). Furthermore, PLBs have expanded into premium and differentiated categories, serving as strategic tools for retailers to communicate innovation, authenticity, and sustainability (Arantola and Juntunen, 2023). Recent research highlights how online retail platforms' introduction of PLBs shapes retailers' strategic positioning and collaborative interactions with manufacturers, influencing both operational decisions and consumer-facing initiatives (Chu *et al.*, 2025). In addition, situational factors such as ambient temperature can affect consumer preference for PLBs over national brands by reducing reliance on brand trust, thereby enhancing PLB performance and providing strategic benefits for retailers (Lundberg and Chavez, 2025). Emerging studies further indicate that PLB loyalty can itself reinforce store trust, suggesting a reciprocal relationship between consumer commitment to private brands and retailer credibility (Karoui *et al.*, 2024). This repositioning underscores the growing importance of PLBs as carriers of broader societal, strategic, operational, and relational value beyond price advantage.

Value Co-creation Behaviour - a key marketing concept, has gained significant attention and emphasises the dynamic relationships between companies and customers (Cheung *et al.*, 2020). It is often viewed as a behavioural form of customer engagement (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2022). The experience-dominant logic model further illustrates how firms can facilitate value co-creation by designing experiences that address service, hedonic, and brand needs, thereby generating corresponding service, hedonic, and brand values, and providing actionable strategic insights for managers (Zha *et al.*, 2024). This paper adopts Yi and Gong's definition, which distinguishes two types of customer value co-creation behaviour: customer participation behaviour (in-role actions necessary for co-creation) and customer citizenship behaviour (voluntary actions that add exceptional value but are not mandatory). We explore PLB customers' participation behaviour (e.g., information seeking, sharing, responsible behaviour, and interaction) and citizenship behaviour (e.g., feedback, advocacy, helping, and tolerance) (Yi and Gong, 2013).

Customer Engagement - has been suggested that it is a strategic obligation for creating an advanced business performance, improved sales figures (Prentice *et al.*, 2019) and a stronger competitive advantage (Kumar and Pansari, 2016). Since customer engagement has gained traction in both business practice and the marketing/branding literature, it has been defined from different perspectives, and scholars have also adopted different key hallmarks for their definitions (Hollebeek, 2011). For instance, Brodie *et al.* (2011, p. 259) emphasised interactive customer experience as a key hallmark of customer engagement and defined the concept as "a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (e.g., a brand) in particular service relationship". On the other hand, Hollebeek (2011, p. 790) defined customer engagement as "the level of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related, and context-dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activity in direct brand interaction".

Recent studies have expanded this understanding in digital and sustainability contexts. Technology-driven engagement, such as AI-powered personalised recommendations, can enhance user interaction and satisfaction but may raise privacy concerns when perceived as intrusive (Ding *et al.*, 2025). The omnichannel share of time concept further emphasises that engagement is a finite resource distributed across competing retail channels, mediating the relationship between omnichannel experience and value co-creation (Rahman *et al.*, 2025). Moreover, involving customers in corporate sustainability activities can activate sustainable consumption through psychological ownership, strengthening engagement and aligning customer behaviour with firms' sustainability goals (Reppmann *et al.*, 2025).

Climate (Change) Engagement - can be defined as encompassing a range of actions aimed at protecting the socio-physical resources on our planet (Corral-Verdugo *et al.*, 2020). Sustainable consumption and production are recognised as fundamental prerequisites for achieving sustainable development (Wang *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, sustainable consumption is defined as "the use of goods and services that fulfil basic needs and improve quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials, and emissions of waste and pollutants throughout the product life cycle, to ensure the needs of future generations are not compromised" (Baker, 1996, p. 94). In essence, it entails fulfilling basic needs without exceeding the Earth's capacity and endangering the lives of future generations (Sharma and Jha, 2017). These actions encompass recycling waste,

reducing electricity consumption, and minimising greenhouse gas emissions. Further, these behaviours can be promoted by consumers' climate (change) engagement, encouraging them to participate in more sustainable options (Schill and Fosse-Gomez, 2025).

Sustainability - Sustainability has become a defining principle of 21st-century progress, grounded in three dimensions: economic, social, and environmental (Chen, 2018). Environmental sustainability, in particular, focuses on preserving natural ecosystems (Dyllick and Muff, 2016). This paper approaches sustainability from the customer perspective, emphasising products and services made from environmentally friendly materials (Leonidou *et al.*, 2013). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established by the United Nations in 2015, outline a “plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity” (United Nations, 2015a), aiming to preserve natural environments and cultural achievements for future generations (Ramaano, 2025a). Moreover, studies in emerging economies illustrate how integrated rural activities and tourism initiatives can simultaneously support environmental sustainability and local livelihoods, highlighting the importance of adhering to sustainable development principles in practice (Ramaano, 2025b). Additionally, research on emerging environmental markets highlights how sustainability initiatives can advance business goals while creating shared value for local communities, reinforcing the societal impact of sustainable practices (Byrareddy *et al.*, 2023). Extending this perspective, Foroudi *et al.* (2023) examined local consumer perceptions of SDGs in reshoring contexts, showing how sustainable production and consumption, economic growth, and community wellbeing influence engagement and advocacy.

Recent studies provide further insights into customer engagement with sustainability. Tahoun *et al.* (2025) show that domestic food waste is driven by both cognitive and emotional processes, with guilt acting as a motivator that can be harnessed through reflective, wisdom-based interventions to promote sustainable consumption routines. Lam (2025) highlights the role of culturally informed city branding in engaging young consumers with sustainable citizenship, demonstrating how emotional attachment and storytelling can foster the co-creation of sustainable city value. Finally, Kolomoiets (2025) identifies barriers to consumer participation in online second-hand markets, emphasising the value-action gap and the need for market designs that facilitate circular consumption practices. Together, these findings illustrate how sustainability is not only a corporate obligation but also a co-created, consumer-driven phenomenon, where engagement, psychological ownership, and market design converge to encourage responsible consumption.

UK Retailers and the SDG Practices - UK retailers have recently intensified their efforts to align with the SDGs, with supermarkets focusing particularly on SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) through initiatives that reduce waste, promote sustainable sourcing, and improve supply chain transparency (McKinsey & Company, 2025). Many now implement eco-labelling, refill stations, and reductions in single-use packaging to encourage sustainable consumer habits (WRAP, 2024). At the same time, alignment with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) has gained traction, as retailers increasingly emphasise fair labour practices, inclusive economic growth, decent working conditions across supply chains, and investments in local job creation and workforce development. These sustainability-driven initiatives not only reinforce retailers' commitment to global goals but also create new opportunities for customer engagement and value co-creation.

Since the transformation of private labels began, researchers have concentrated on comparative studies to highlight the contrasts between national and PLBs from various perspectives. These include different positioning strategies and consumer perceptions (Fuduric *et al.*, 2022), and the economic motivations driving consumer preference for private labels and price-value assessments (Boyle *et al.*, 2018). Web Appendix 1 provides a summary of consumer studies related to PLBs, offering a clearer depiction of the recent literature.

This study highlights a gap in research on how PLB consumers perceive and respond to retailers' sustainability initiatives. Despite growing interest in PLB consumers, little empirical work has explored the intersection of sustainability, customer engagement, and value co-creation from the consumer's perspective. To address this, the research investigates key drivers and expressions of engagement among climate-conscious PLB consumers. It presents a conceptual model (Figure 4) linking sustainability to customer engagement and value co-creation, identifying both retailer-driven factors (like sustainability initiatives) and customer-driven factors (such as climate awareness), along with behavioural outcomes including advocacy, feedback, and waste reduction.

Methodology

Research Context – This study conducted an in-depth qualitative exploration of environmentally conscious PLB customers' value co-creation behaviours and engagement journeys. It focused on how these consumers interpret and express their engagement with retailers' sustainability efforts, capturing narratives about their motivations, climate concerns, and brand interactions. This approach reveals the complex, meaning-rich processes through which engagement forms and value are co-created in environmentally responsible consumption.

Research Design - A qualitative research design was selected, as it allows for the exploration of consumer perceptions and behaviours in greater depth than quantitative methods. This approach is particularly well-suited for examining how individuals interpret and attach meaning to sustainability initiatives in PLBs, capturing the richness and complexity of lived experiences that numerical data alone cannot convey. To address gaps in the current literature, a qualitative approach was employed to explore this complex and under-researched phenomenon. Focus groups were chosen as the primary method for generating relevant issues and deep insights, with potential for follow-up individual interviews (Malhotra *et al.*, 2017). As noted by Stewart and Shamdasani (2014), focus groups effectively gather background information, generate ideas, identify challenges, and deepen understanding of consumer perceptions. They leverage group dynamics to stimulate emotional responses and reflective discussion (Morgan, 1996). In this study, focus groups were ideal for uncovering social norms and shared meanings around customer engagement and value co-creation related to sustainability and PLBs (Belk *et al.*, 2012).

Sampling - Participants were selected using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling, thus ensuring accessibility and willingness while capturing characteristics relevant to the study's objectives (Dörnyei, 2007). The participants were recruited from the first author's social network. However, a basic checklist was used to confirm that all participants were PLB users (Etikan *et al.*, 2016), and demographic screening ensured relative homogeneity in age, gender, and income. To further minimise selection bias, participants were recruited based on age, income, gender, family size, shopping frequency, and marital status (Hennink *et al.*, 2019). While reliance on the first

author's network may have introduced some degree of homogeneity, this was mitigated by purposive criteria designed to ensure diversity of the relevant characteristics. This approach enabled the inclusion of individuals likely to have meaningful insights into sustainable retail practices and customer engagement. Web Appendix 2 summarises the focus group sessions, participant characteristics, and topics discussed.

Ethical Considerations – Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board prior to the study. Participants received detailed information sheets explaining the study's purpose and procedures and provided informed consent before participation. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used and identifying details were removed from transcripts (Smith, 1995). Data were securely stored and managed in accordance with GDPR and institutional data protection policies.

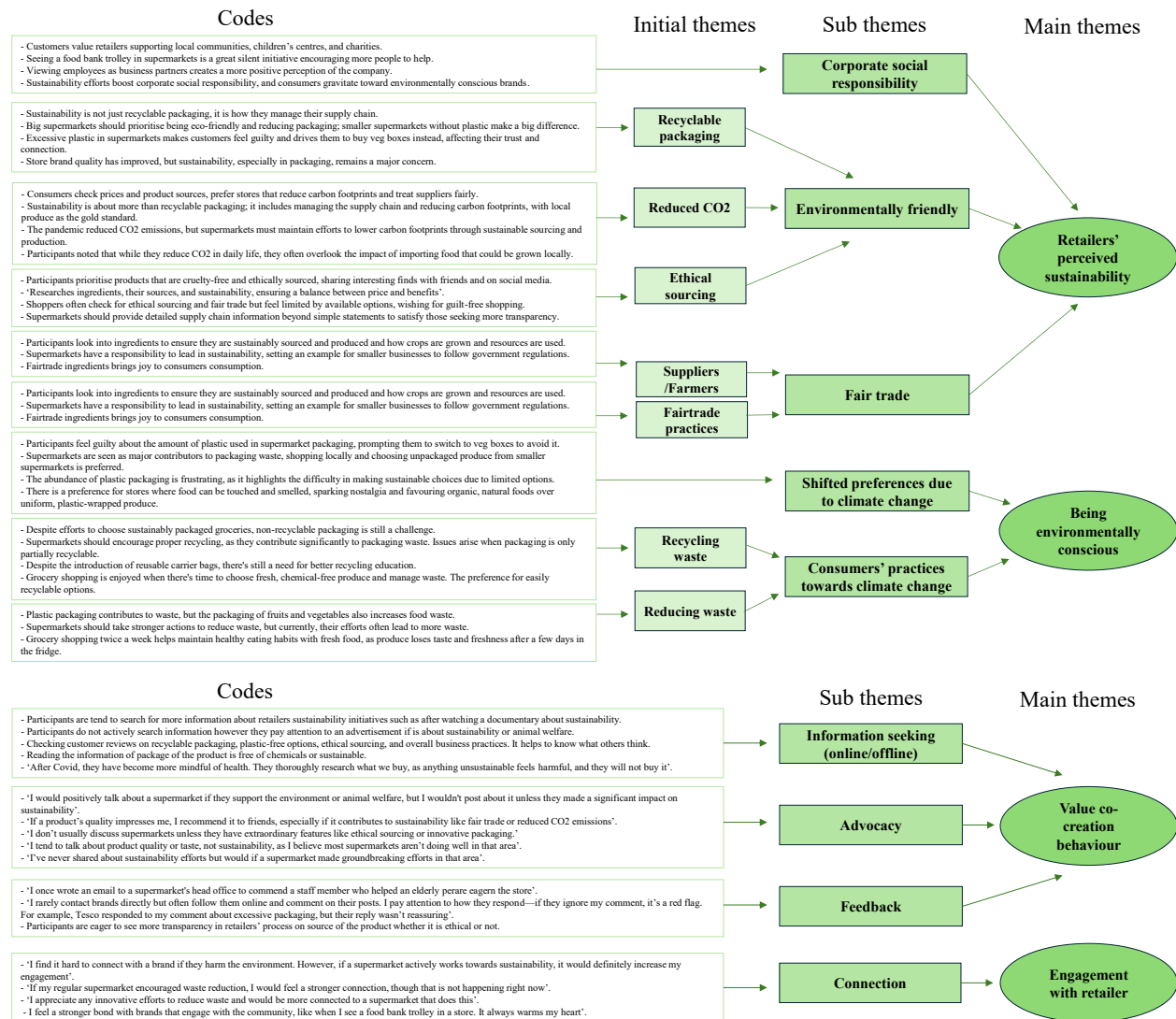
Data Collection – Six online focus groups were conducted with 33 British PLB customers between November 2021 and February 2022. An interview guide was developed based on literature on sustainability perceptions, customer engagement, and value co-creation, alongside input from subject-matter experts. The guide featured open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses. To ensure face validity, the guide was reviewed by all researchers and two additional academics, ensuring relevance and participant relatability. A pilot session was held beforehand to test the discussion format, refine the use of terminology, and improve participant engagement (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2002). The focus groups, held via Zoom, began with general topics (preferred retailers, shopping habits) before moving to sustainability awareness, perceptions of retailer initiatives, and engagement behaviours. Sessions were audio-recorded and moderated to ensure balanced participation and prevent dominance by any individual. Thematic saturation was achieved iteratively across focus groups, with recruitment and discussion continuing until no new themes or insights emerged, indicating data richness sufficient for theoretical insights and model development (Lowe *et al.*, 2018).

Data Analysis - Recorded focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The study employed thematic analysis, which is widely used in social sciences; it is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). Unlike focusing on unique or idiosyncratic meanings found in individual data items, thematic analysis prioritises identifying commonalities in how a topic is discussed or written about (Boyatzis, 1998). Therefore, transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (King and Brooks, 2017). First, they familiarised themselves with the data by repeatedly listening to recordings, thoroughly reading transcripts, and compiling key points. Second, open coding identified initial concepts and broad thematic categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Third, axial coding refined and organised emerging themes. Fourth, themes and data were reviewed for consistency and adjusted as needed. Finally, selective coding distilled the main themes and generated thematic maps for the focus groups (Flick, 2009). This systematic process enabled the identification of patterns in participants' perceptions and behaviours, ensuring both rigour and transparency in the analysis.

The coding was validated through informant feedback (Jonsen and Jehn, 2009) to enhance transparency and rigour. After the initial coding, summaries and emerging themes were shared with a subset of participants, whose feedback clarified interpretations and highlighted nuances that were initially overlooked. This input directly informed the refinement of codes, the definition of themes, and the development of sub-themes, ensuring that the analysis accurately reflected participants' perspectives. NVivo software for Windows v12 was used for data storage and the systematic management of codes, facilitating efficient retrieval of relevant text. In addition, thematic findings were interpreted through theoretical triangulation, integrating frameworks on customer engagement and value co-creation. This approach enriched the analysis by providing multiple interpretive lenses, thereby strengthening the validity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the results. The complete analysis process is shown in Web Appendix 3.

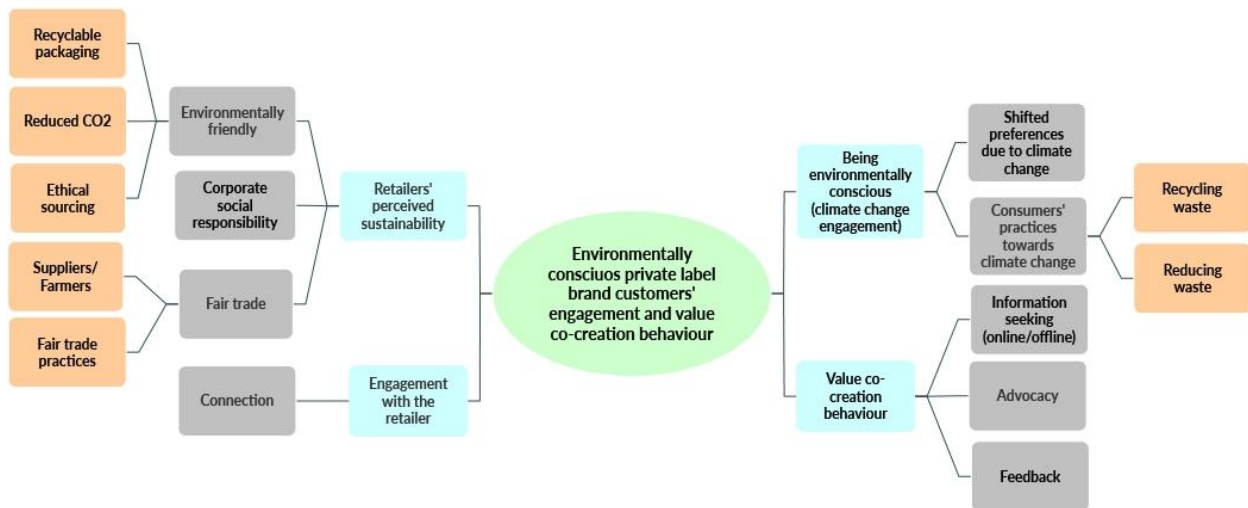
The analysis revealed distinct main themes. Retailers' sustainability emerges from codes detailing environmentally friendly practices like recyclable packaging and reduced CO₂ emissions, alongside broader corporate social responsibility (CSR) and fair trade practices involving suppliers and farmers. This perception, in turn, interacts with the main theme of being environmentally conscious, driven by consumers' shifted preferences and existing practices towards climate change. Finally, the theme of engagement with the retailer is shaped by a sense of connection and, indirectly, fair trade practices. These elements collectively influence the central theme of environmentally conscious PLB customers' engagement and value co-creation behaviour, which manifests in sub-themes like information seeking, advocacy, and feedback, leading to tangible outcomes such as recycling and reducing waste. The diagram visually represents these relationships, showing retailer-driven and customer-driven antecedents influencing customer engagement and value co-creation, which in turn drives specific pro-environmental behaviours. Figure 1 presents the relationships among key themes associated with environmentally conscious consumer behaviour and retailer strategies, while Figure 2 displays the mind map derived from the qualitative data analysis.

Figure 1. Thematic map obtained from the focus group discussions



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 2. A depiction of initial, sub and main themes extracted from the discussions.

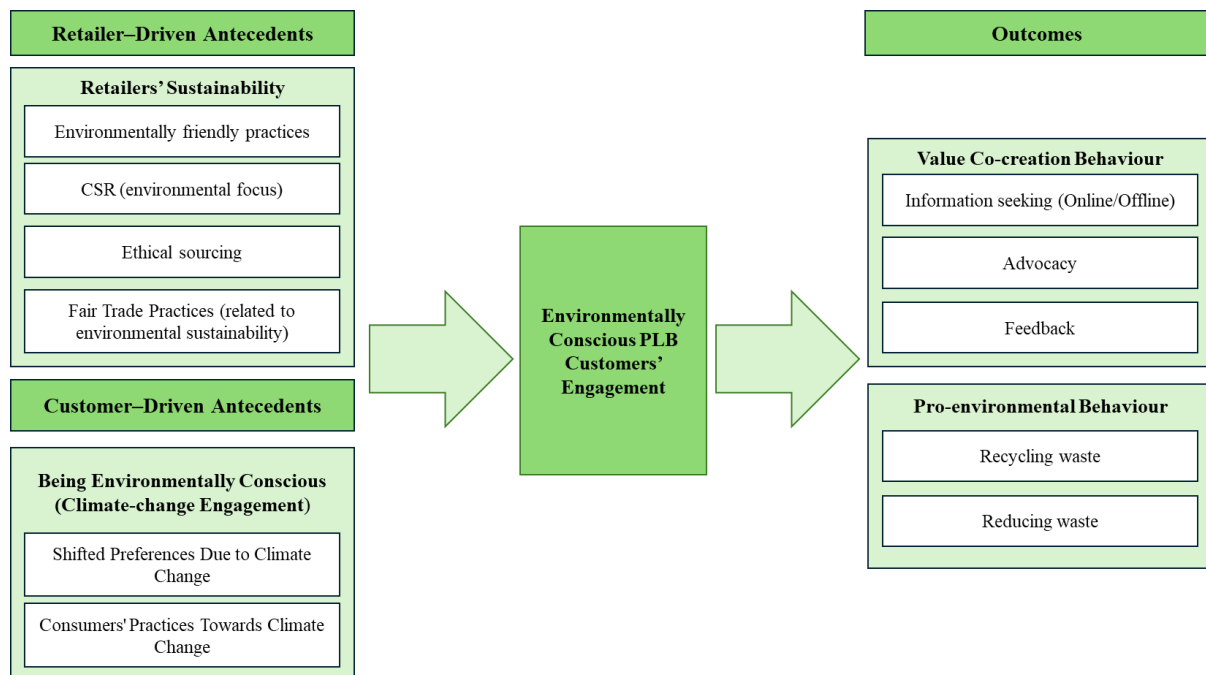


Source: The mind map developed using NVivo 12. Authors' own work.

Findings

Focus group analysis revealed four key themes shaping PLB consumer behaviour in the context of sustainability: retailers' perceived sustainability (including recyclable packaging, ethical sourcing, and CSR), which helps build authenticity and reduce scepticism; customer engagement, reflecting interactions with these initiatives; being environmentally conscious (climate change engagement), which influences purchasing and usage decisions; and value co-creation behaviours, showing how consumers actively contribute to shaping sustainable practices. The study demonstrates that sustainability influences engagement among environmentally conscious PLB consumers, with both retailer initiatives and customer values playing key roles. Similar to prior research linking CSR and sustainability to value co-creation and customer engagement (Khan and Fatma, 2023), findings show that ethical sourcing, eco-friendly practices, and CSR efforts resonate with climate-conscious consumers. This alignment strengthens emotional and cognitive connections, fostering engagement through behaviours such as advocacy, feedback, and information seeking. These engaged consumers also exhibit pro-environmental behaviours like recycling and waste reduction, reinforcing their role as co-creators of sustainable value. The proposed model (Figure 3) is presented as an emergent model, developed inductively from the qualitative findings while refined through dialogue with existing frameworks. It illustrates this virtuous cycle, highlighting key antecedents and outcomes of PLB engagement within a sustainability context.

Figure 3. Conceptual model: drivers and outcomes of environmentally conscious private label brand customer engagement and value co-creation behaviour



Source: Author's own work

Sustainability – Customer engagement literature shows a positive link between sustainability and customer-brand engagement, extending to customer-to-customer and customer-to-retailer relationships (Khan and Fatma, 2023). Sustainability influences behaviours such as loyalty, advocacy, emotional connection, and value co-creation (Ko and Jeon, 2024), highlighting the role of authentic sustainability in strengthening customer engagement and value co-creation, with implications for theory, managerial practice, and societal trust in retail sustainability. Brands perceived as sustainable foster deeper engagement and stronger brand bonds (Perez-Vega *et al.*, 2025). Recent experimental work has highlighted how self-conscious emotions such as pride can motivate consumers with materialistic tendencies to engage with sustainable luxury brands, particularly when sustainability is made detectable (Islam *et al.*, 2025). While this evidence derives from luxury contexts, it underscores the importance of affective drivers in shaping consumer responses to sustainability initiatives, which is also relevant to PLB contexts. Yet, little is known about how PLB customers perceive sustainability. To address this, we explored participants' views on sustainability practices at their preferred supermarkets, revealing that consumers see supermarkets as experiential spaces valuing social responsibility and staff interaction. For instance, a 43-year-old rehab therapist actively observes her supermarket's efforts in tackling social issues like unemployment and economic challenges.

A supermarket is not just a place where you buy stuff and pay for it... You might have favourite staff members you enjoy chatting with every time you go... You also notice how they run their business or pick up on news about them. I always pay attention to things like how they address social issues, like unemployment or economic challenges. (FG2P6)

Participants identified 100% recyclable packaging and animal welfare as key indicators of a retailer's genuine sustainability commitment, emphasising the theoretical and practical importance of perceived authenticity in sustainability initiatives for building trust, engagement,

and responsible consumer behaviour. For instance, a 40-year-old learning assistant stated she actively checks product sourcing, especially in poultry. However, some participants felt that while certain supermarkets show authentic efforts, others appear to adopt sustainability initiatives superficially to align with social trends.

I have a few favourite supermarkets... because they support so many different charities and really give back to the community. When I visit X, I can also see how much they care about animal welfare... They have had 100% recyclable packaging for a long time, and it's clear they are dedicated to sustainability. (FG1P4)

Some supermarkets are following the sustainability trend because they do not want to fall behind in the competition. But you can tell the difference, some brands make sustainability their motto, while others are just doing it because they have to. That is how it comes across to me as a customer. (FG6P5)

Being Environmentally Friendly: Recyclable Packaging

Participants highlighted three core dimensions of environmental responsibility in retail: recyclable packaging, ethical sourcing, and carbon footprint reduction, thus underscoring the theoretical, practical, and societal significance of environmental responsibility in shaping consumer perceptions, engagement, and sustainable choices. Participants viewed sustainability as a key responsibility for supermarkets. Non-recyclable packaging was seen as a sign of poor sustainability. Some participants actively checked for ethical sourcing and recyclable packaging before deciding where to shop, showing that such factors influence store choice.

These days, sustainability is a big deal, especially for supermarkets, because they have such a huge responsibility. For instance, if I see a supermarket using non-recyclable packaging, I do not think they are truly sustainable. (FG3P4)

I gather information before a visit... For example, I check if it has been ethically sourced or the package is recyclable. Then I go to the store based on that information. (FG5P5)

Participants voiced frustration with supermarkets over excessive plastic packaging. A full-time caregiver preferred smaller retailers that avoid plastic, while another turned to veg boxes due to discomfort with plastic-wrapped produce. These views reflect a trust gap between consumers and big supermarkets on environmental issues, especially packaging, illustrating the societal and practical implications of trust and transparency in sustainable retail practices, and the need for innovation to enhance customer engagement.

I get annoyed, especially with big supermarkets. Being eco-friendly, sustainable, and ethical is very important. I think especially now they should be aware of that and come up with better, more flexible and creative ideas on how they can reduce the packaging. That's why I prefer to go to the smallest supermarkets. (FG6P3)

I find myself feeling horrible and guilty when I go to the supermarket, walking around in the aisles and all the vegetables wrapped in plastic, exactly pushing me away. Like I do get veg boxes now instead of going to the supermarket. The issue is plastic, which affects my trust and my connection. (FG5P3)

Participants acknowledged improvements in store brand quality, though some categories still felt like lower-quality alternatives. Concerns were raised about sustainability, especially packaging, revealing a common consumer dilemma: balancing quality with environmental responsibility. This raises the question of how supermarkets can meet both expectations

without compromise, highlighting the theoretical and practical implications for understanding consumer decision-making trade-offs between product quality and sustainability.

The quality of store brands has improved over time... When I think of all supermarkets and their own labels, I still feel like some categories are just dupes, whereas some items, such as a bar of chocolate from X or Y are better than others. But how sustainable are these products that we buy every single day? Especially the packaging is the most concerning one. It should be recyclable, reduced plastic or no plastic if it is possible. (FG2P2)

Being Environmentally Friendly: Reduced CO₂

Similarly, participants emphasised that sustainability goes beyond packaging, encompassing supply chain practices, carbon footprint, and local sourcing. Supermarkets were seen as having a major role in reducing emissions, especially given their control over own-label product sourcing, underscoring the societal and managerial importance of retailers' broader environmental responsibility.

Sustainability is not just about recyclable packaging; it is also about things like how they manage their supply chain. Where do their ingredients come from? Are they working to reduce their carbon footprint? For me, the gold standard of sustainability is shopping locally and choosing local produce. (FG6P1)

I think everyone now knows that greenhouse gases cause a huge climate change issue... I think at this point supermarkets have a big responsibility to reduce CO₂ emissions and carbon footprints. Because they are responsible from the production or sourcing of their own range -you can see that half of the products are own labels in a typical supermarket in the UK- they have control to do that. (FG4P2)

A 32-year-old teacher's story highlights the ethical and emotional tensions in sustainable shopping. Though connected to Zimbabwean green beans culturally, she questions the environmental impact of imports when local options exist, reflecting the complexity of sustainability beyond just CO₂ emissions.

We usually try to cut down on the CO₂ we produce, like taking the Tube instead of driving. But when it comes to food, we don't always think about it. For example, we might see food from Africa or even New Zealand... and not give it much thought... Because of my African roots, I feel emotional when I see green beans from Zimbabwe. I hope the farmers growing them are treated well.... I wonder why supermarkets are still bringing these vegetables all the way from Zimbabwe when we could probably grow them here, especially with how advanced agriculture is now. Not a good practice in terms of CO₂ reduction. (FG2P5)

Being Environmentally Friendly: Ethical Sourcing

Participants linked product quality with ethical sourcing and sustainability. Private label consumers valued transparency on ingredients, origin, and production, showing a clear demand for ethical and environmentally responsible practices, and thus highlighting the theoretical and practical implications for trust, brand authenticity, and customer engagement.

Product quality is very important to me. If I am going to try a new product, I would definitely do some research. This includes the ingredients, the source of the ingredients, whether they are ethically and sustainably sourced or not. (FG1P5)

Sometimes we pay attention to small details, such as if the products are ethically sourced or whether fair trade practices were followed or not. At the end of the day, we haven't got many

options, even if supermarkets have not followed these regulations, because we need to buy our food or groceries. However, it would be nice to shop without feeling too guilty. (FG3P2)

In the newsletter or on supermarket's website, we see simple statements such as "we are committed to supporting farmers and producers and treating natural resources fairly"; however, a bare statement is not enough to prove anything. I know some people do not have that much awareness... But some of us are keen to know more. (FG4P4)

Corporate Social Responsibility

Focus group insights show that while value and convenience matter, CSR efforts strengthen brand loyalty. A 31-year-old student favours X partly for its community support, highlighting how CSR can deepen emotional connections with supermarkets, underscoring practical and societal implications for enhancing customer engagement and community trust.

I am a big fan of X because I can find everything I need there. I also like how they handle their business, like funding local communities and children's centres through charitable initiatives. It feels good to shop somewhere that supports the people around you. (FG5P1)

Participants valued visible community support, like food bank trolleys, and linked CSR with brand appeal. This suggests supermarkets can strengthen customer engagement by expanding charitable initiatives.

I love seeing the trolley filling up for the food bank... You see some people who try to raise funds and you avoid them. But that trolley waits there in silence. I think there could be more chances for the people who can help. (FG1P1)

I like shopping at X because the quality is better... When I pay, they always say X will donate to charity with every purchase. It might not sound like much, but if 500 people shop there in a day, that's £5 going to a good cause. It adds up! (FG5P4)

I think whatever a supermarket brand does for sustainability adds up to its corporate social responsibility... If a company does not do good things for the environment, then you start to use them less, and eventually, some other brand will replace them. (FG4P5)

Fair Trade: Suppliers/Farmers and Fair-trade Practices

Participants expressed concern over the lack of transparency in own-brand sourcing, especially for meat and dairy. Clearer packaging and fair supplier practices were seen as essential for trust and loyalty among ethically conscious consumers, pointing to the importance of theoretical and practical aspects for building trust and ethical brand perception.

I noticed that you get less information on some of the packaging, and they are not sustainable... I would like to know if the retailer does their part in this matter. For example, if we are talking specifically about food, such as meat, they are less likely to have information about where the meat is sourced and where they are from. When it comes to meat, dairy anything that has a short life span, I am less likely to buy if they have less information on their packages. (FG5P6)

I check the price, and I try to understand their product sources, such as which farms they are sourcing in the UK to reduce carbon footprints... I'd like to see that they are a bit selective about what they are bringing into their store. It is also important how they treat their suppliers and farmers, as they should treat them fairly. (FG6P2)

Participants also noted the lack of detailed information on own-brand packaging. A 37-year-old procurement officer valued the rotation of suppliers and year-round availability of private label products but pointed out the limited details about the suppliers and farmers, emphasising the importance of supply chain transparency for building credibility and long-term consumer trust.

I have favourite items from different supermarkets. I love X's black grapes; they're always firm, sweet, and juicy... I always check the origin of the items; for instance, I know blueberries from Peru are sweeter than others. Supermarkets work with so many suppliers and farmers... While they usually provide the origin of the produce, they do not share much information about the suppliers or farmers they collaborate with. (FG3P1)

Statements from several participants reveal varied views on fair trade, supermarkets' leadership in sustainability, and private label value. A 30-year-old fitness centre supervisor highlighted that consumers increasingly value products that are sustainably produced and fairly traded, emphasising responsible resource use, fair compensation, and good working conditions for producers. These insights underscore the societal expectation that retailers move beyond profit-driven motives, positioning themselves as leaders in ethical and sustainable retailing.

The most important part of sustainability is the ingredients in the products. Are they really made from sustainable materials and produced sustainably? It really bothers me when I see harmful chemicals in my food or packaging made from bad materials. I also care about how crops are grown and under what conditions. (FG1P3)

A 36-year-old classroom assistant praised the quality and ethical appeal of private-label products made with fair-trade ingredients, citing X's fair-trade-certified milk chocolate with nuts as an example of enhanced consumer value. A 52-year-old beauty salon owner emphasised that supermarkets should lead by example in adopting sustainability regulations and fair trade practices, highlighting the role of large retailers in setting ethical sourcing standards that smaller businesses might follow.

Some private label products surprise you. For example, I like X's in-house bakery, Y's milk chocolate with nuts... The fact that it is made with fairtrade ingredients. When I am surprised by these kinds of things, I post on my social media. I also recommend these products to my friends and family members. (FG5P2)

I feel like supermarkets have much bigger responsibilities than just feeding the nation. They should lead by example, especially when it comes to implementing new government regulations around sustainability. (FG6P4)

A 44-year-old purchase manager noted growing demand for fair trade products, emphasising minimal agrochemicals and biodiversity, signalling a market trend that supermarkets can strategically leverage to align with evolving consumer values and strengthen competitive advantage.

I am interested in fair trade practices. I am a purchase manager at a medium-sized grocery store that focuses on niche and authentic food items. People are becoming environmentally conscious, and we make it a priority to stock fair-trade products. These are made with minimal and safe use of agrochemicals and with attention to biodiversity. I can see firsthand that the demand for these kinds of groceries is growing every day. (FG2P4)

Being Environmentally Conscious: Shifted Preferences due to Climate Change

Consumer habits are shifting due to climate change, driving sustainable behaviours like reducing plastic waste, recycling and buying locally (Lin *et al.*, 2022). Focus groups revealed that these concerns strongly influence private label preferences, especially around packaging. This highlights how sustainability behaviours are not only consumption choices but also drivers of customer–brand relationships, reinforcing theories of value co-creation and brand attachment. For example, participants expressed guilt over plastic-wrapped vegetables and favoured veg boxes to cut waste. A 46-year-old beauty technician noted a rise in shopping locally at smaller stores with unpackaged produce and frustration with large retailers’ slow action on packaging waste, underscoring a critical gap between consumer expectations and retail practices with implications for trust and long-term engagement.

Supermarkets could be the biggest reason for increased waste due to packaging... I think that we are nowhere near where we should be. What I do on a personal level is try to shop locally and prefer small supermarkets where you can find veggies and fruits unpackaged... I buy packaged groceries such as cereals or washing-up liquids because there is no other choice... Some retailers opened some branches where you can fill up your cereals or porridge oats. That would be very cool if I had this option close to where I live. (FG6P6)

Participants expressed frustration with the widespread use of plastic packaging in groceries, despite some being recyclable. This illustrates how sustainability barriers in retail settings complicate consumer attempts at value co-creation and weaken perceptions of authenticity. Their comments highlight the difficulties in making sustainable choices given current retail limitations. A 37-year-old business strategist linked the sensory experience of selecting fresh, unpackaged produce to positive childhood memories, noting that his preference for organic foods is undermined by the dominance of uniform, plastic-wrapped fruits and vegetables, indicating the need for retailers to address packaging practices that not only shape environmental outcomes but also influence trust and emotional brand connections.

I feel irritated every time I come back from my usual grocery shopping. When I lay everything out, it’s so clear that about 90% of what I have bought is either wrapped in plastic or the package contains plastic. Even if some of it is made from recycled materials, I know it still takes a lot of energy to produce those packages in the first place. It makes me think about how much waste we create without even realising it and how hard it is to avoid plastic when so many products are packaged that way. (FG4P1)

My wife does the shopping mostly, but when I do, I like to shop in stores where you can touch and smell the food. When you smell strawberries, and they are nice and fragrant, it takes me back to my childhood... When you see all those veggies and fruits in plastic and identical to each other, it doesn’t make me feel good and reduces my appetite. (FG3P3)

Consumer Practices Towards Climate Change: Recycling Waste and Reduced Waste

The literature indicates that consumers are increasingly motivated to adopt environmentally sustainable behaviours like mindful recycling, reducing food waste, and minimising overall waste (Thøgersen, 2021). This reflects growing awareness of the need for collective action against climate change and resource depletion. Participants, as private label consumers, voiced concerns about supermarket packaging waste, especially plastic. Many were frustrated by excess and non-recyclable packaging, which complicates waste reduction. Such frustrations highlight the gap between consumers’ pro-sustainability intentions and the structural limitations imposed by retail practices, which can weaken perceived retailer authenticity and consumer trust. They felt supermarkets should take a more active role by offering recyclable or alternative packaging and supporting recycling efforts. This underscores not only the managerial need for retailers to lead in packaging innovation but also the societal importance

of equipping consumers with better recycling knowledge to enable meaningful collective action.

If you are a regular supermarket customer, you are probably wasting a considerable amount of waste per week... I do my best to choose grocery items packaged with sustainable materials, but sometimes, you still buy ones that are not sustainable because you have no control over them. But as customers, we are changing because of the increased awareness... We don't want to leave a horrible place to the next generations. (FG2P1)

Supermarkets should encourage people to recycle... I check every package whether they are recyclable or not. I get so annoyed that some items' packages are half recyclable and the other half is not. For example, the film is not recyclable, but the tray is. If the film is not recyclable, then they should find an alternative. (FG1P2)

I agree with that. The same thing happens for conditioners, for example. You need to rip the film cover to recycle the bottle. There is too much fuss in our daily lives. We simply want to recycle where it is possible, but producers should make it easier for us. (FG1P4)

I still feel there are so many people out there who need a bit of education about recycling. I visited one of my cousins the other day.... It made me so annoyed when she didn't rinse the milk bottle when it was finished... These little things that you do every day could make a big impact on the environment. (FG5P6)

Interestingly, some participants also acknowledged the positive impact supermarkets can have on sustainability by encouraging reusable practices, such as the introduction of carrier bag fees. Others expressed a desire for better alternatives, such as paper bags, which they perceived as easier to recycle than plastic bags. These reflections illustrate how small policy nudges can shift consumer habits and reinforce pro-environmental norms, strengthening perceptions of retailer responsibility. At the same time, they reveal opportunities for supermarkets to adopt more innovative packaging solutions that align with consumer expectations for convenience and environmental responsibility.

Well, one good thing that supermarkets did very well was starting to sell those carrier bags, then people could gain a habit of reusing stuff... This is just an example of how supermarkets can influence our habits in terms of sustainability. (FG4P3)

I love checking out the freshness of the produce and looking for items with fewer or no chemicals. I also pay attention to waste, not just the packaging, but also the carrier bags we use. In some American movies, I have seen paper bags, and I wish we had those here. Reusable plastic bags are good, but I think paper bags are easier to recycle. (FG2P5).

Many participants recognised that supermarkets contribute to food waste not only through packaging but also by selling large quantities. They were frustrated by the lack of smaller portion options for fruits and vegetables, which leads to both food and packaging waste. A common theme was the desire to reduce food waste without increasing packaging, prompting shoppers to buy smaller amounts more frequently to keep food fresh and avoid waste.

The packaged fruits increase the percentage of waste. I live alone, and I don't need to buy my fruit and veggies packaged in four or six. Most of the supermarkets have just some fruits and veggies on the loose, not the full range. I don't want to waste my food and money, but sometimes you have no option. (FG3P3)

I want to buy less to reduce food waste and the packages we throw away. When it comes to packaging waste, if they are recyclable, then you feel a bit better. But at the end of the day, we still use resources to reverse the packaging. This process harms nature. (FG1P4)

I go grocery shopping two times in a typical week. The main reasons are I want to eat healthy and get fresh food. When you eat veggies or fruits that sat in your fridge for more than 5 days, they lose their taste and freshness. The second reason is that I don't want to buy bulk because potentially they can go to waste. (FG5P5)

Ultimately, participants demonstrated a commitment to more sustainable habits but recognised that changing consumption patterns is a gradual process. Many emphasised that supermarkets must do more to help customers make sustainable choices, highlighting that reducing waste requires joint effort from both consumers and retailers.

Supermarkets should take more initiatives and encourage us to reduce waste, but at the moment, they are more likely to increase. On a personal level, I am ready to change my consumption habits. However, you cannot do this overnight; it is a long way to go. (FG6P2)

Value Co-creation Behaviour

Rather and Sharma (2019) highlight customer engagement as an interactive process involving cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social investments in value co-creation, while Font *et al.* (2021) emphasise sustainability as a key driver of such behaviour. Within this framework, value co-creation can be distinguished between customer participation (e.g., information-seeking) and customer citizenship behaviours (e.g., feedback and advocacy), a distinction also reflected in participant discussions (Yi and Gong, 2013).

Feedback

Participants were generally reluctant to provide positive feedback about their experiences unless the incident was exceptionally noteworthy. For example, one of the participant's decision to report a staff member's exceptional act of kindness significantly improved his perception of the brand. However, feedback is more commonly given when there are issues or negative experiences. Complaints are typically about service dissatisfaction or perceived injustices. This highlights the asymmetric nature of customer feedback and its implications for brand-customer engagement strategies. Recent research also underscores the role of co-creational customer capital in translating firms' sustainability initiatives into positive societal outcomes, demonstrating that active customer participation enhances engagement and value co-creation (Verma *et al.*, 2023). While this evidence derives from high-contact service startups in emerging markets, it reinforces the importance of encouraging customer feedback and co-creative behaviours in PLB contexts to strengthen both brand relationships and sustainability impacts.

For me to inform them about something positive, there should be a huge wow effect. For example, once I saw a staff member helping an elderly citizen who fell in the store. He went beyond his initiative and helped the poor lady like he treated his own mother... I wrote an email to the head office and made sure his behaviour was recognised. Surely, it influenced my overall opinion about the brand. (FG5P3)

I leave comments under the supermarket's social media posts, even if they are not entirely relevant. It is important to see if they respond to my comments... I once commented on X's post about their packaging because I was frustrated with the excessive plastic used in our food. They replied, saying they were working on it, but their response did not feel very reassuring. (FG1P5)

Online interactions and brand responsiveness on social media are crucial. One participant noted that unsatisfactory replies to his comments on X's social media harmed his perception of the brand. He emphasised a strong interest in ethical sourcing and environmental impact, highlighting consumers' demand for transparency and accountability from supermarkets. This underscores the role of digital engagement in shaping trust and sustaining customer-brand relationships.

I am very concerned about the source of the meat, whether it has been ethically sourced, the type of food the animals are fed, their living conditions, and the environmental impact of the entire process. I am not saying everyone should be vegan... I once commented on X's content about these issues. They always make claims, but the problem is that we rarely get to see the actual process behind their statements. (FG6P3)

Advocacy

Advocacy is most likely to emerge when brands take substantial, positive actions, particularly in areas such as sustainability initiatives and ethical practices. Participants reported that they were more inclined to recommend brands that demonstrate a commitment to high product quality and sustainable operations, showing the importance of sustainability-driven advocacy for enhancing brand engagement and consumer connection.

I can talk positively about a supermarket if they are doing nice things for the environment. I would not post anything about them, but I would comment about my appreciation if they did something nice for animal welfare. (FG4P1)

I would probably share my views about retailers' efforts towards sustainability if they were really making a groundbreaking effort. (FG6P5)

While everyday conversations typically revolve around product quality and taste, remarkable efforts in ethical sourcing or innovative, eco-friendly packaging have the potential to spark more enthusiastic advocacy. Such initiatives capture attention and motivate consumers to share positive experiences, both in personal interactions and on social media, reinforcing the role of sustainability in driving engagement and brand support.

If supermarkets make good contributions towards sustainability, such as fair trade and reduced CO₂ emissions and waste, that would be a plus for me to share on my social media. (FG2P2)

I cannot say that I can talk about supermarkets to others unless there is something extraordinary, such as ethical sourcing and innovative packaging. Not sure about posting on social media... Also, not about their sustainability because I don't think supermarkets are doing good on that. (FG2P6)

Information Seeking

Exposure to documentaries, such as "Cowspiracy," had significantly influenced participants to seek more information about supermarket practices related to the environmental impact. Even participants who preferred passive information acquisition through advertisements or media reported that such exposure shaped their perceptions of brands, highlighting the role of information in driving conscious customer engagement.

I watched a Netflix documentary called Cowspiracy... It was pretty shocking. After that, I started looking into what supermarkets are doing or planning to solve this problem. Sure, expecting everyone to go vegan might be unrealistic, but we really need to take action before it's too late. (FG5P2)

I do not actively search for what supermarkets are doing in terms of their business practices, but if I come across any information, I would read it. For example, I saw a print advert once, saying they take animal welfare seriously. It was nice to see, especially considering how poorly animals are often treated by humans. (FG4P4)

During discussions, participants emphasised the importance of checking other customers' comments on sustainability practices, showing that peer opinions significantly shape individual perceptions. Product ingredients and sustainability were critical factors, with participants actively seeking information to ensure products met their health and ethical standards. The pandemic further reinforced this behaviour, increasing vigilance and making consumers more proactive in evaluating both the health and environmental attributes of the products they purchase for their families.

I don't actively search for information about what they are doing, but I check some comments from other customers thoughts on recyclable packaging, ethical sourcing...I like to know what others are thinking. (FG1P2)

I always check what ingredients are used in products. Are they sustainable? Free of chemicals? If I am trying something new, including own-label products, I always read the ingredients... If I find any ingredients that are not sustainably produced, it is a straight no for me. (FG3P5)

With Covid, we now understand the value of being healthy better. I monitor what I and my family eat especially my children. Therefore, I seek a lot of information about anything we buy. Anything unsustainable means something nasty inside. (FG6P6)

Customer Engagement

As environmental awareness grows, consumers increasingly prioritise sustainability. Companies that adopt sustainable marketing not only improve brand perception but also foster positive consumer attitudes, gaining a competitive advantage by engaging sustainability-conscious customers (Cantele and Zardini, 2018). Businesses perceived as committed to sustainability resonate more with consumers, enhancing their support, engagement, and loyalty (Cogut *et al.*, 2019). Our focus groups with UK PLB consumers confirm this pattern. Participants emphasised that brands harming the environment weaken their connection, whereas supermarkets actively pursuing sustainability strengthen it. This highlights the theoretical importance of sustainability in shaping engagement, practical implications for brand strategy, and societal relevance in promoting environmentally responsible consumption.

It is hard for me to feel any connection with a brand if they are harming the environment. (FG4P3)

If I see a supermarket actively making efforts towards sustainability, I would definitely feel closer to them, and it would increase my connection. (FG2P3)

Introducing programmes to reduce waste would strengthen participants' connection to their usual supermarket, though they observed a current lack of such initiatives. Similarly, participants appreciated innovative efforts towards waste reduction, suggesting that these initiatives could enhance their connection with a supermarket.

For example, if my usual supermarket introduced something that encouraged me to reduce waste, I would feel a stronger connection with them. But honestly, at the moment, I can't say that's happening. (FG2P4)

Any sort of innovative application towards reduced waste is much appreciated. I would love to see if a supermarket is doing this. Of course, that could increase my connection. (FG3P1).

The importance of supermarkets connecting with the community has also been emphasised such as through food bank initiatives. Seeing tangible efforts to support the community, like a food bank trolley, fosters a stronger emotional connection to the brand.

I love it when a supermarket makes an effort to connect with the community. For example, seeing a food bank trolley always warms my heart and makes me feel more connected to the brand. (FG1P1)

Overall, the findings demonstrate that retailers' perceived sustainability, consumers' environmental consciousness, and value co-creation behaviours are closely interconnected. Participants responded positively to authentic sustainability initiatives, ethical sourcing, and CSR efforts, which strengthened emotional and cognitive engagement with supermarkets. Conversely, superficial or inconsistent practices undermined trust and brand connection. Consumers actively sought information, provided feedback, and engaged in advocacy when sustainability efforts aligned with their values, highlighting the importance of transparent and effective initiatives. These insights reveal both theoretical and practical implications for understanding private label customer engagement and guiding supermarkets toward more meaningful, sustainable practices that benefit society.

Discussion, Implications, and Further Studies

Theoretical Implications - This study provides an initial contribution to empirical research on customer engagement and value co-creation behaviour with PLBs. Its main contribution is revealing the impact of sustainability on value co-creation behaviour and engagement. The findings show that climate-conscious consumers actively seek and evaluate retailers' sustainability initiatives, and these, in turn, drive consumers' value co-creation behaviour and engagement with the retailer. The study also explores how consumers' engagement with climate change can be integrated into brand purpose-driven strategies and influence their product selection, purchase, and usage decisions.

Furthermore, it fills a critical knowledge gap by examining PLB consumers' perceptions of sustainability, engagement, and value co-creation behaviour, offering valuable insights for future research. The customer engagement literature highlights the need for further validation of the concept in different contexts, brand categories, and customer groups (Rosado-Pinto and Loureiro, 2020; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2022). It has also underscored the interactive nature of engagement and the importance of cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social investments in value co-creation. By focusing on PLBs, this study addresses these gaps and contributes to the broader theoretical understanding of customer engagement's antecedents and consequences.

Empirical Implications - Exploring the lived experiences of environmentally conscious PLB consumers provides evidence that retailers' sustainability efforts influence both value co-creation behaviour and customer engagement. Unlike studies that rely primarily on large-scale quantitative surveys, this qualitative approach captures consumers' detailed perceptions and experiences, highlighting nuances often overlooked in numerical data. The findings, therefore, extend prior work by demonstrating how engagement is expressed not only through purchasing but also through advocacy, feedback, and sustained involvement in sustainability-oriented initiatives. Furthermore, our findings suggest potential theoretical extensions by considering

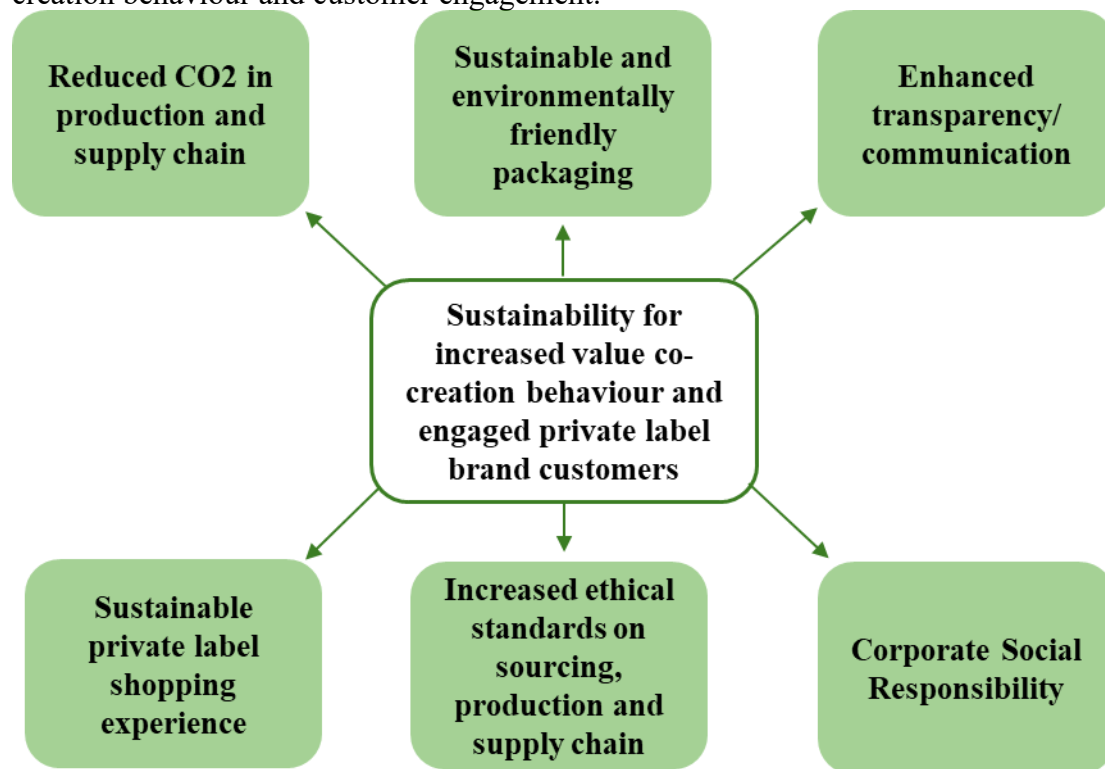
how engagement intensity may interact with consumers' sustainability orientation, potentially amplifying or moderating the pathways through which PLB customers co-create value and advocate for sustainability initiatives.

Managerial and Practical Implications - This research offers important managerial insights by synthesising the customer engagement literature with empirical findings from PLB customers. First, the results show that PLB customers actively seek detailed information about retailers, their products, and their sustainability practices. Participants closely examined product attributes such as ingredients, materials, and sourcing, often favouring retailers committed to sustainability goals like reducing CO₂ emissions and waste. Climate-conscious consumers expressed disappointment when retailers failed to meet expectations, particularly regarding plastic and non-recyclable packaging, and sometimes switched to more sustainable alternatives.

Second, participants prioritised recyclable or minimal packaging and evaluated retailers' sustainability strategies and social initiatives, including partnerships and community involvement. To meet these expectations, retailers should provide transparent and accessible information on sustainability practices, manufacturing processes, and supply chains. Such transparency is likely to increase customer engagement and strengthen interactive, collaborative relationships (Yu *et al.*, 2021).

Third, the findings challenge the prevailing notion that PLB consumers are driven primarily by price. While value for money remains important, consumers also demand product quality and sustainability without compromise. Engagement behaviours such as advocacy and feedback were found to strengthen the retailer–customer relationship, with sustainability serving as a powerful driver of value co-creation. Practical insights from the focus groups, summarised in Figure 4 and further detailed in Table 2, provide actionable guidance for retailers by highlighting the key sustainability dimensions that influence customer engagement. These dimensions encompass reducing CO₂ emissions across production and supply chains through low-impact logistics and energy-efficient manufacturing, adopting environmentally friendly packaging that minimises plastics and uses recyclable or compostable materials, and providing transparent, accessible information on sourcing, production processes, and sustainability initiatives. They also include maintaining ethical sourcing and production standards, ensuring fair labour practices, responsible material selection, and regulatory compliance, as well as implementing corporate social responsibility initiatives that support communities and social impact programmes. Collectively, these elements reinforce consumer trust, promote loyalty, and foster value co-creation through responsible retail practices.

Figure 4. An overview of managerial strategies and directions aimed at enhancing value co-creation behaviour and customer engagement.



Source: Authors' own work

Table 1: Key Sustainability Themes and Retailer Actions for Private Label Brands

Aspect	Actions / Initiatives
Reduced CO₂	• Reduce CO₂ emissions by optimising production and supply chains with energy-efficient technologies and sustainable practices. • Focus on local sourcing to lower transportation emissions, support regional economies, and minimise environmental impact. • Prioritise locally grown produce over global imports to reduce carbon footprints and provide fresher, more sustainable options.
Sustainable and environmentally friendly packaging	• Innovative packaging with minimal plastic usage. • Increase the availability of unpackaged produce options. • Ensure packaging is 100% recyclable, not partially recyclable. • Provide clear information on how to recycle packaging effectively. • Minimise packaging waste by reducing single-use materials and implementing sustainable alternatives.
Enhance Transparency / Communication	• Communicate detailed product sourcing and supply chain information to meet the demands of informed consumers. • Provide comprehensive details on sourcing, ethical practices, and sustainability to raise awareness.

	• Use social media to effectively promote ethical and sustainable products, reaching a wider audience. • Acknowledge and respond to customer feedback on sustainability concerns, ensuring transparency and building trust.
Sustainable Private Label Shopping Experience	• Create a tactile and sensory shopping experience by using innovative or minimal packaging solutions. • Offer a broader selection of sustainable products to empower environmentally conscious choices. • Promote recyclable packaging that is easy to separate and process. • Offer paper carrier bags as an alternative to reusable plastic bags. • Provide unpackaged or minimally packaged produce, allowing customers to choose portions and reduce food waste.
Increased ethical standards on sourcing, production and supply chain	• Promote ethical farming by offering products from suppliers with high animal welfare standards. • Provide a wider selection of ethically sourced products to help consumers align with their values. • Expand product lines to include more sustainable alternatives. • Offer a broader range of fair trade-certified products both in-store and online. • Encourage fair trade purchases with incentives like discounts or loyalty rewards. • Ensure fair treatment of farmers and suppliers, especially in countries with lower labour standards, by promoting ethical sourcing and fair wages. • Encourage the efficient use of natural resources like soil and water, while minimising deforestation, to support sustainable agricultural practices.
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	• Engage customers with donation matching, cause-driven loyalty programs, and charity events. • Adopt ethical business models to boost brand image, trust, and consumer loyalty. • Make CSR efforts visible, like food bank trolleys, by showcasing donation opportunities or impact reports. • Offer educational campaigns on proper recycling to encourage sustainable choices.

Source: Authors' own work

Technological Implications - The findings also carry technological implications for both research and practice. The demand for transparent information on sustainability highlights the potential role of digital platforms, retailer apps, and AI-driven recommendation systems in shaping consumer perceptions and engagement. Technologies that track and communicate product provenance, packaging recyclability, or carbon footprint could enhance consumer trust and strengthen engagement. Future research should further investigate how digital technologies can be integrated into retailers' sustainability strategies to support customer value co-creation and engagement with PLBs.

Societal Implications - This study carries significant societal implications, showing that customer engagement with sustainable PLBs extends beyond individual purchase behaviour to shape wider social and environmental outcomes. A key contribution lies in quality-of-life improvements: by supporting healthier lifestyles, reducing exposure to harmful materials, and encouraging more sustainable consumption choices, sustainability-oriented PLBs directly enhance consumer well-being. Retailers' adoption of sustainable strategies—such as reducing single-use plastics, lowering carbon emissions, and investing in community-focused initiatives—further promotes climate action (SDG 13), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), inclusive economic growth (SDG 8), and partnerships for sustainable development (SDG 17).

At the same time, the findings highlight a broader societal debate on consumer versus retailer responsibility in climate action. Consumers increasingly act as agents of accountability, using their advocacy and purchasing behaviour to pressure firms to aspire to higher ethical and environmental standards. However, retailers hold the structural power to design, implement, and scale sustainable practices across supply chains. This tension underscores the need for a co-responsibility model, where systemic change depends on both active consumer participation and robust retailer leadership. Ultimately, PBL sustainability initiatives not only advance environmental stewardship and social well-being but also foster progress toward a more sustainable and equitable economy.

Limitations and Future Research - This study offers valuable insights into how sustainability and climate change engagement influence PLB consumer perceptions, engagement, and value co-creation. However, several limitations create opportunities for further inquiry. First, while our focus groups provided rich qualitative insights, the sampling approach was both purposive and convenient. They represent a limited sample that may not fully capture variations across demographic, cultural, or market contexts. Future research could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to strengthen generalisability and uncover causal mechanisms. Second, our focus on sustainability and climate change may not encompass all cognitive, emotional, and social factors shaping PLB engagement. Expanding these dimensions will provide a more holistic understanding of engagement drivers, including the role of consumer scepticism and perceived greenwashing, which may affect trust, authenticity perceptions, and co-creation behaviours. Third, the retail context is evolving rapidly through digital platforms, AI-based recommendation systems, and app-mediated interactions. Future research should investigate how these technologies impact customer engagement and perceptions of sustainability in the PLB domain.

To guide these extensions, we present a structured overview of potential research directions in Table 2. The table links our two research questions to possible extensions, proposed research questions, including the influence of scepticism and greenwashing, and methodological suggestions. By building directly on our findings, these future avenues highlight theoretical, empirical, and practical opportunities to deepen understanding of PLB sustainability, climate engagement, and consumer behaviour.

Table 2. Future Research Questions and Extensions for PLB Customer Engagement

Focus Area	Proposed Extensions	Suggested Research Questions
Sustainability perceptions and engagement (RQ1)	Extend cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of	How do cognitive factors beyond sustainability (e.g., trust, authenticity, transparency) affect value co-creation with PLBs?

	sustainability perceptions	• In what ways do emotional and social dimensions interact with cognitive perceptions in shaping engagement? • How does consumer scepticism or perceived greenwashing influence engagement and co-creation behaviours?
Climate change engagement and practices (RQ2)	Explore antecedents, outcomes, and cross-context variations	• What are the key antecedents and outcomes of sustainable PLB customer engagement? • How does engagement differ across cultural and international contexts? • What role do retailer-specific communications and technologies play in shaping climate-conscious customer engagement?
Retailer-driven antecedents	Broaden the investigation of firm-led sustainability practices	• How do environmentally friendly practices, CSR initiatives, ethical sourcing, and fair-trade activities drive PLB engagement? • Which retailer-led initiatives are most effective in fostering trust and loyalty?
Customer-driven antecedents	Examine evolving consumer orientations and climate-conscious preferences	• How do environmentally conscious consumers adapt PLB consumption in response to climate change? • What role do personal values, awareness, and activism play in engagement with sustainable PLBs?
Engagement: value co-creation behaviours	Investigate specific engagement modes and drivers	• What motivates consumers to engage in information seeking, advocacy, and feedback with retailers? • How do digital and physical retail environments facilitate these co-creation behaviours?
Engagement: pro-environmental behaviours	Link everyday sustainable behaviours to retail engagement	• How do recycling, waste reduction, and sustainable shopping habits influence PLB loyalty? • To what extent do retailers facilitate or hinder these behaviours?
Consequences: outcomes for retailers and consumers	Assess the dual impact of engagement outcomes	• How does sustainable PLB engagement drive brand attachment, loyalty, and advocacy? • What consumer outcomes emerge (e.g., satisfaction, empowerment, wellbeing)?

Source: Authors' own work

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