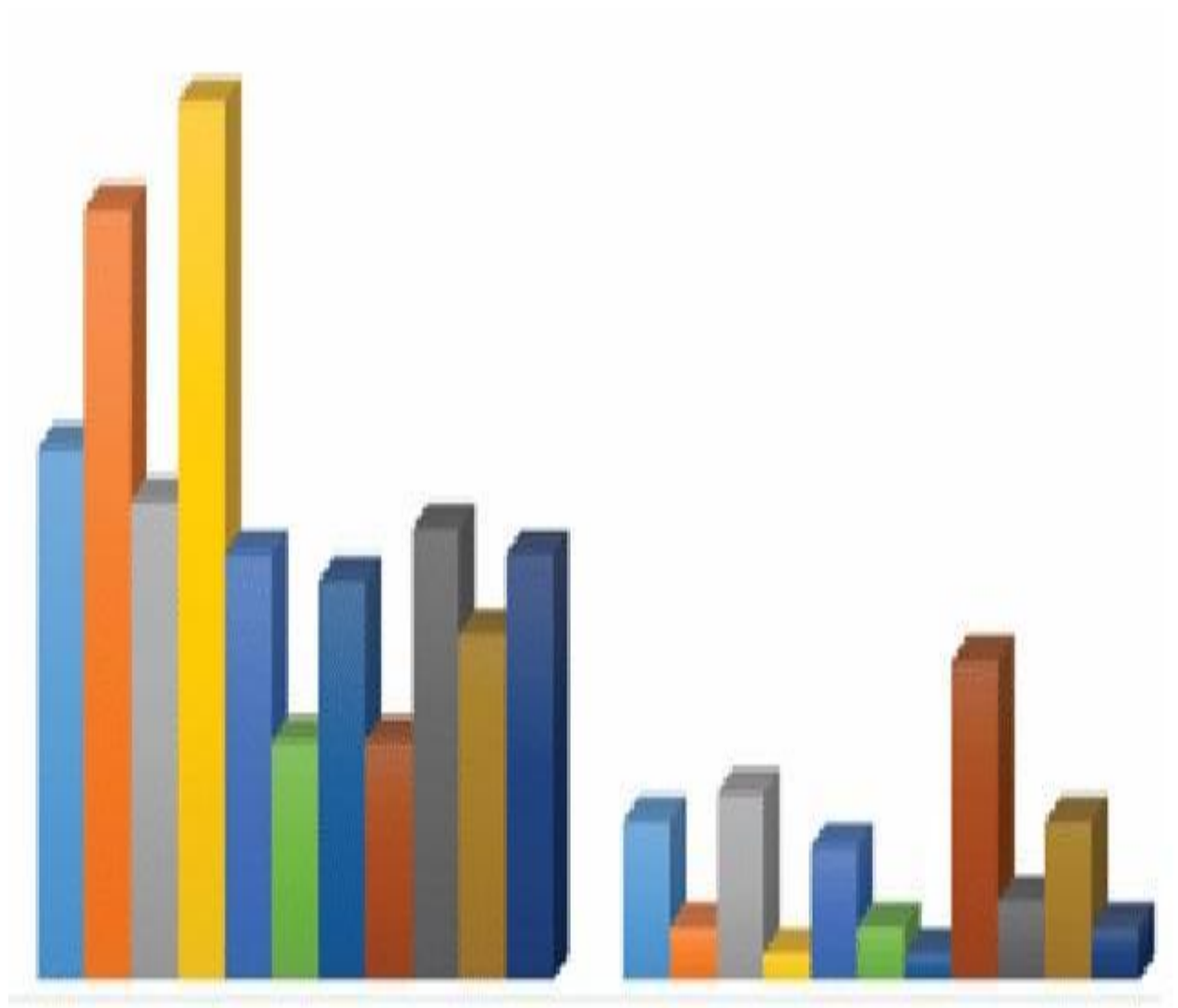


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Research Article

Ethical Branding and Consumer Perceptions in Eco-Fashion Markets

Nadia Afrin Esha¹; Nahian Abrar Daiyan¹; Md. Tariquul Islam¹; Kazi Abdul Mannan²

²Department of Fashion Design & Technology, Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Correspondence

Email:
ahmedesha987@gmail.com

²Department of Business Administration, Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology Dhaka, Bangladesh.

ABSTRACT

The growing environmental and social challenges associated with the global fashion industry have accelerated the emergence of eco-fashion and ethical branding practices. This study examines how ethical branding influences consumer perceptions and purchasing behaviour within eco-fashion markets. Using a qualitative research design based on secondary data, the study synthesises insights from academic literature, industry reports, and theoretical perspectives, including Stakeholder Theory, Signalling Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour. The findings indicate that ethical branding significantly enhances brand image, perceived value, and consumer trust. However, the effectiveness of these strategies is constrained by the persistent intention-behaviour gap, driven by factors such as price sensitivity, limited accessibility, and scepticism toward sustainability claims. Transparency, authenticity, and credible signalling mechanisms are identified as critical determinants of consumer trust. Furthermore, the integration of sustainability with aesthetic and functional attributes is essential for broader market acceptance. The study contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between ethical branding and consumer behaviour and provides strategic insights for fashion brands seeking to strengthen their position in sustainable markets.

Keywords: ethical branding; eco-fashion; consumer perception; sustainability; brand trust; green marketing; sustainable consumption

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1. Introduction

The global fashion industry has long been recognised as one of the most resource-intensive and environmentally damaging sectors, characterised by excessive water consumption, chemical pollution, and waste generation. The rise of fast fashion has intensified these challenges by accelerating production cycles and encouraging disposable consumption patterns (Niinimäki et al., 2020). In response to growing environmental and social concerns, eco-fashion-often referred to as sustainable or ethical fashion-has emerged as a transformative paradigm aimed at mitigating the negative impacts of traditional fashion systems.

Eco-fashion encompasses a broad range of practices, including the use of organic and recycled materials, environmentally friendly production processes, ethical labour practices, and circular business models such as recycling and upcycling. As global awareness of climate change, environmental degradation, and social inequality continues to rise, consumers are increasingly demanding transparency and accountability from fashion brands. This shift has prompted companies to integrate sustainability into their core strategies, particularly through ethical branding initiatives.

Ethical branding refers to the deliberate incorporation of moral values, environmental responsibility, and social consciousness into a brand's identity, messaging, and operations. It involves not only promoting eco-friendly products but also ensuring that all aspects of

the value chain adhere to ethical standards. In the context of eco-fashion, ethical branding serves as a critical mechanism for communicating sustainability commitments to consumers and differentiating brands in an increasingly competitive marketplace (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2020).

The growing importance of ethical branding is closely linked to changes in consumer behaviour. Contemporary consumers, particularly younger generations, are becoming more conscious of the environmental and social implications of their purchasing decisions. Studies indicate that consumers are more likely to support brands that align with their personal values, including sustainability, fairness, and transparency (McNeill & Moore, 2015). As a result, ethical branding has become a strategic tool for building brand equity, enhancing customer loyalty, and fostering long-term relationships with consumers.

However, the relationship between ethical branding and consumer behaviour is complex and multifaceted. While many consumers express positive attitudes toward sustainable fashion, these attitudes do not always translate into actual purchasing behaviour. This discrepancy, commonly referred to as the intention-behaviour gap, represents a significant challenge for eco-fashion brands (Carrington et al., 2010). Factors such as higher prices, limited availability, and perceived trade-offs in style and quality often deter consumers from choosing sustainable alternatives.

Moreover, the proliferation of sustainability claims in the fashion industry has led to increased scepticism among consumers. The

practice of greenwashing-where companies exaggerate or misrepresent their environmental efforts-has undermined trust and made it more difficult for consumers to identify genuinely ethical brands (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). As a result, transparency and authenticity have become critical components of effective ethical branding strategies.

Another important aspect of ethical branding is the role of communication and signalling. Brands use various signals, such as certifications, labels, and marketing campaigns, to convey their sustainability credentials to consumers. These signals play a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions and reducing information asymmetry (Connelly et al., 2011). However, the effectiveness of these signals depends on their credibility and the extent to which consumers understand and trust them.

In addition to external factors, internal psychological processes also influence consumer responses to ethical branding. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) suggests that consumer behaviour is determined by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of eco-fashion, this implies that even if consumers have positive attitudes toward sustainability, their behaviour may be constrained by social pressures and practical limitations.

Given these complexities, there is a need for a comprehensive analysis of how ethical branding influences consumer perceptions and behaviour in eco-fashion markets. While existing research has explored various aspects of sustainable consumption, there

remains a gap in understanding the interplay between branding strategies and consumer perceptions in this context.

This study aims to address this gap by examining the role of ethical branding in shaping consumer perceptions in eco-fashion markets. Specifically, it seeks to explore how ethical branding strategies influence consumer trust, attitudes, and purchase intentions, as well as the factors that hinder or facilitate sustainable consumption. By adopting a qualitative research approach based on secondary data, this study provides a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with ethical branding in the fashion industry.

2. Literature Review

Ethical branding has gained significant attention in recent years as organisations strive to align their operations with sustainability principles. In the fashion industry, ethical branding involves integrating environmental and social considerations into brand identity, product development, and marketing communication. This approach goes beyond traditional branding by emphasising values such as responsibility, transparency, and accountability (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2020).

Eco-fashion brands often employ ethical branding strategies to differentiate themselves in the marketplace. These strategies include the use of sustainable materials, ethical sourcing practices, and transparent supply chains. By communicating these practices effectively,

brands aim to create a positive image and build trust among consumers. However, the success of ethical branding depends on the perceived authenticity of these efforts.

Authenticity is a key determinant of consumer responses to ethical branding. Consumers are more likely to trust brands that demonstrate consistency between their stated values and actual practices. In contrast, inconsistencies or lack of transparency can lead to scepticism and erode trust (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Therefore, ethical branding must be supported by genuine commitment and verifiable actions.

2.1 Consumer Perceptions and Attitudes toward Eco-Fashion

Consumer perception refers to the process by which individuals interpret and evaluate information about products and brands. In the context of eco-fashion, perception is influenced by both cognitive and emotional factors, including beliefs about sustainability, environmental concern, and personal values.

Research indicates that consumers generally hold positive attitudes toward eco-fashion, associating it with attributes such as quality, innovation, and social responsibility (Niinimäki, 2010). However, these positive perceptions are often accompanied by concerns about price, availability, and aesthetic appeal. Many consumers perceive eco-fashion products as more expensive and less fashionable compared to conventional alternatives.

The role of values is particularly important in shaping consumer perceptions. Value-driven consumers are more likely to prioritise ethical considerations in their purchasing

decisions. However, the extent to which these values influence behaviour varies depending on situational factors and individual differences (McNeill & Moore, 2015).

2.2 The Intention-Behaviour Gap in Sustainable Consumption

One of the most persistent challenges in sustainable consumption research is the intention-behaviour gap. While consumers may express a willingness to support ethical brands, their actual behaviour often falls short of these intentions (Carrington et al., 2010).

Several factors contribute to this gap. Economic constraints, such as higher prices of eco-fashion products, are a major barrier. Additionally, limited availability and lack of convenience can discourage consumers from choosing sustainable options. Psychological factors, such as habit and perceived effort, also play a role in shaping behaviour.

Another important factor is the perceived trade-off between sustainability and other product attributes. Consumers may prioritise factors such as style, comfort, and brand reputation over ethical considerations. This highlights the need for eco-fashion brands to deliver products that meet both functional and ethical expectations.

2.3 Trust, Transparency, and Greenwashing

Trust is a fundamental element of consumer-brand relationships, particularly in the context of ethical branding. Consumers rely on trust to evaluate the credibility of sustainability claims and make informed purchasing decisions. However, the

prevalence of greenwashing has undermined trust and created scepticism among consumers (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Greenwashing occurs when companies make exaggerated or misleading claims about their environmental practices. This not only deceives consumers but also harms genuinely sustainable brands by creating confusion and reducing overall trust in the market.

Transparency is a critical factor in building trust. Brands that provide clear and detailed information about their sustainability practices are more likely to gain consumer confidence. This includes disclosing information about sourcing, production processes, and environmental impact.

Certifications and labels also play a significant role in enhancing transparency. Third-party certifications can serve as credible signals of sustainability, helping consumers differentiate between authentic and misleading claims (Connelly et al., 2011). However, the proliferation of labels can also lead to confusion, highlighting the need for standardisation and consumer education.

2.4 The Role of Communication and Signalling

Communication is central to the effectiveness of ethical branding. Brands use various communication strategies to convey their sustainability efforts, including advertising, social media, and packaging. These strategies are designed to influence consumer perceptions and build brand equity.

Signalling theory provides a useful framework for understanding how brands

communicate their ethical commitments. Signals such as certifications, eco-labels, and sustainability reports help reduce information asymmetry and convey credibility (Connelly et al., 2011).

However, the effectiveness of these signals depends on their clarity and reliability. Consumers may struggle to interpret complex sustainability information, particularly when multiple labels and claims are involved. This underscores the importance of clear and consistent communication.

2.5 Social Influence and Cultural Factors

Social and cultural factors also play a significant role in shaping consumer perceptions of eco-fashion. Subjective norms, as described in the Theory of Planned Behaviour, influence individuals' decisions by reflecting societal expectations and peer behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

Consumers are more likely to adopt sustainable consumption practices if they perceive them as socially desirable. Social media and influencer marketing have further amplified the role of social influence by promoting sustainable lifestyles and raising awareness about ethical issues.

Cultural context also affects consumer perceptions and behaviour. In some regions, sustainability is a key consideration in purchasing decisions, while in others, economic factors may take precedence. This highlights the need for context-specific strategies in ethical branding.

2.6 Emerging Trends in Eco-Fashion Branding

Recent developments in technology and business models are reshaping the landscape of eco-fashion. Innovations such as digital transparency tools, blockchain technology, and circular economy practices are enhancing the credibility and effectiveness of ethical branding.

For example, blockchain technology enables traceability in supply chains, allowing consumers to verify the origin and sustainability of products. Similarly, circular business models, such as rental and resale platforms, are promoting sustainable consumption by extending the lifecycle of fashion products (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

These emerging trends highlight the dynamic nature of eco-fashion markets and the evolving role of ethical branding in addressing sustainability challenges.

3. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the relationship between ethical branding and consumer perceptions in eco-fashion markets requires a multidimensional theoretical approach. This study draws upon three complementary theoretical perspectives: Stakeholder Theory, Signalling Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens through which to analyse how ethical branding influences consumer attitudes, trust, and purchasing behaviour.

3.1 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory, originally developed by Freeman (1984), posits that organisations must consider the interests and well-being of all stakeholders, rather than focusing solely on shareholder value. Stakeholders include customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and the environment. In the context of eco-fashion, this theory underscores the importance of ethical responsibility and sustainability as integral components of business strategy.

Ethical branding can be understood as a manifestation of stakeholder-oriented practices. Fashion brands that adopt ethical branding strategies demonstrate their commitment to addressing the concerns of various stakeholders, including environmental protection and social equity. For example, the use of sustainable materials and fair labour practices reflects a broader commitment to minimising harm and creating value beyond profit.

From a consumer perspective, stakeholder-oriented branding enhances perceived corporate social responsibility (CSR), which in turn influences brand trust and loyalty (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Consumers increasingly expect brands to act responsibly and contribute positively to society. As a result, companies that align their branding strategies with stakeholder expectations are more likely to gain a competitive advantage.

However, Stakeholder Theory also highlights the challenges associated with balancing diverse stakeholder interests. For instance, efforts to ensure sustainability may increase production costs, leading to higher prices for

consumers. This tension underscores the need for strategic decision-making in ethical branding, where companies must balance ethical commitments with market competitiveness.

3.2 Signalling Theory

Signalling Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how ethical branding communicates value to consumers in situations characterised by information asymmetry. According to Connelly et al. (2011), signalling occurs when one party (the sender) conveys information to another party (the receiver) to reduce uncertainty and influence perceptions.

In eco-fashion markets, information asymmetry is particularly pronounced. Consumers often lack direct knowledge of a product's environmental and social impact, making it difficult to assess the credibility of sustainability claims. Ethical branding addresses this challenge by using signals such as eco-labels, certifications, and sustainability reports to communicate a brand's commitment to ethical practices.

These signals serve as indicators of quality, credibility, and trustworthiness. For example, third-party certifications such as organic or fair trade labels can enhance consumer confidence by providing independent verification of sustainability claims. Similarly, transparent communication about supply chains and production processes can reduce scepticism and build trust.

However, the effectiveness of signals depends on their credibility and clarity. Weak or ambiguous signals may fail to convey meaningful information, while misleading

signals can lead to consumer distrust. The prevalence of greenwashing in the fashion industry has further complicated the signalling process, as consumers may question the authenticity of sustainability claims (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Signalling Theory also emphasises the importance of consistency between signals and actual practices. Brands that fail to align their communication with their actions risk damaging their reputation and losing consumer trust. Therefore, ethical branding must be supported by genuine and verifiable efforts to ensure its effectiveness.

3.3 Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) is widely used to explain consumer decision-making processes. According to TPB, behaviour is determined by three key factors: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control.

In the context of eco-fashion, attitudes refer to consumers' evaluations of sustainable products, including their beliefs about environmental and social benefits. Positive attitudes toward sustainability are often associated with higher purchase intentions. However, attitudes alone are not sufficient to predict behaviour.

Subjective norms refer to social influences and perceived expectations from others. Consumers may feel pressure to adopt sustainable consumption practices if they believe that such behaviour is socially desirable. Social media and influencer marketing have amplified the role of

subjective norms by promoting ethical consumption as a normative behaviour.

Perceived behavioural control refers to the extent to which consumers believe they can perform a behaviour. In eco-fashion markets, this includes factors such as affordability, availability, and accessibility of sustainable products. Limited perceived control can hinder the translation of positive attitudes into actual behaviour.

TPB is particularly useful in explaining the intention-behaviour gap observed in sustainable consumption. Even when consumers have favourable attitudes and supportive social norms, constraints such as high prices or limited availability may prevent them from acting on their intentions (Carrington et al., 2010).

3.4 Integrative Framework

By integrating Stakeholder Theory, Signalling Theory, and TPB, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding ethical branding in eco-fashion markets. Stakeholder Theory emphasises the ethical responsibilities of brands, Signalling Theory explains how these responsibilities are communicated, and TPB elucidates how consumers interpret these signals and translate them into behaviour.

This integrative approach highlights the interconnected nature of ethical branding and consumer perception. It suggests that effective ethical branding requires not only responsible practices but also credible communication and an understanding of consumer psychology.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring complex and context-dependent phenomena such as consumer perceptions and ethical branding. Unlike quantitative approaches, which focus on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research emphasises depth, interpretation, and understanding of underlying meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The choice of a qualitative approach is justified by the exploratory nature of the research. Ethical branding and consumer perception are multifaceted constructs influenced by social, cultural, and psychological factors. A qualitative design allows for a comprehensive examination of these dimensions by synthesising insights from existing literature.

4.1 Data Sources

The study relies on secondary data collected from a wide range of credible sources. These include:

- Peer-reviewed academic journals
- Books and scholarly publications
- Industry reports and market analyses
- Publications from international organisations
- Reputable online databases

Secondary data analysis offers several advantages. It allows researchers to access a large body of existing knowledge, reduces the time and cost associated with primary data collection, and enables the comparison

of findings across different studies (Johnston, 2017).

However, the use of secondary data also presents challenges, such as variability in data quality and potential biases in original studies. To address these issues, this study employs strict selection criteria to ensure the reliability and relevance of the data

4.2 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process involved a systematic review of literature related to ethical branding, eco-fashion, and consumer behaviour. Relevant studies were identified using academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science.

Keywords used in the search process included “ethical branding,” “sustainable fashion,” “consumer perception,” “green marketing,” and “eco-fashion.” Studies published within the last decade were prioritised to ensure the relevance and timeliness of the findings.

Inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Studies focusing on ethical branding or sustainable fashion
- Research addressing consumer perceptions or behaviour
- Peer-reviewed publications or credible industry reports
- English-language sources

Exclusion criteria included non-scholarly sources, outdated studies, and publications lacking methodological rigour.

4.3 Data Analysis Method

The study employs thematic analysis as the primary method for analysing secondary

data. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis was conducted in several stages:

- **Familiarisation:** Reviewing and summarising selected studies
- **Coding:** Identifying key concepts and recurring themes
- **Theme Development:** Grouping codes into broader themes
- **Interpretation:** Analysing relationships between themes and theoretical frameworks

Key themes identified include consumer trust, perceived value, price sensitivity, transparency, and the intention-behaviour gap. These themes are analysed in relation to the theoretical framework to provide a cohesive understanding of the research problem.

4.4 Reliability and Validity

Ensuring reliability and validity is critical in qualitative research. This study employs several strategies to enhance the credibility of its findings.

Reliability is addressed through the use of consistent data selection and analysis procedures. By applying clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, the study ensures that only relevant and high-quality sources are included.

Validity is enhanced through triangulation, which involves comparing findings from multiple sources to identify consistent patterns. The use of well-established

theoretical frameworks further strengthens the validity of the analysis.

Additionally, the study maintains transparency in its methodology by clearly documenting the data collection and analysis processes.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

As this study is based on secondary data, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants. However, ethical considerations remain important.

All sources are properly cited to acknowledge original authors and avoid plagiarism. The study also ensures that data are used responsibly and interpreted accurately, without misrepresentation (Mannan & Farhana, 2026).

4.6 Limitations of the Methodology

Despite its strengths, the methodology has certain limitations. The reliance on secondary data means that the study is dependent on the quality and scope of existing research. It may not capture emerging trends or real-time changes in consumer behaviour.

Additionally, the findings may not be universally generalizable, as consumer perceptions and ethical branding practices vary across cultural and regional contexts.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating primary data collection methods, such as surveys or interviews, to provide more context-specific insights.

5. Findings and Analysis

The analysis of secondary data reveals a multifaceted relationship between ethical branding and consumer perceptions in eco-fashion markets. Several key themes emerge, including the enhancement of brand image through ethical positioning, the mediating role of trust, the persistence of the intention-behaviour gap, the influence of price and accessibility, and the importance of transparency and communication. These themes are interconnected and reflect the complex dynamics of sustainable consumption.

5.1 Ethical Branding as a Driver of Positive Brand Image

One of the most consistent findings across the literature is that ethical branding significantly enhances brand image and perceived value. Consumers tend to associate eco-fashion brands with positive attributes such as quality, innovation, responsibility, and authenticity. These associations contribute to stronger brand equity and differentiation in competitive markets (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2020).

Ethical branding functions as a symbolic representation of a brand's values and commitments. By emphasising sustainability and social responsibility, brands position themselves as morally aligned with consumer concerns about environmental degradation and ethical labour practices. This alignment fosters emotional connections and enhances brand loyalty.

However, the impact of ethical branding on brand image is contingent upon perceived authenticity. Consumers are increasingly

discerning and are able to differentiate between genuine ethical efforts and superficial marketing claims. Brands that fail to demonstrate consistency between their messaging and actual practices risk damaging their reputation and losing consumer trust (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

5.2 Trust as a Central Mediating Variable

Trust emerges as a critical factor mediating the relationship between ethical branding and consumer behaviour. Consumers rely on trust to evaluate the credibility of sustainability claims and to reduce uncertainty in their purchasing decisions. Ethical branding strategies that emphasise transparency, accountability, and consistency are more likely to foster trust.

The role of trust can be understood through Signalling Theory, which suggests that brands use signals to convey information about their quality and reliability (Connelly et al., 2011). In eco-fashion markets, signals such as certifications, eco-labels, and sustainability reports play a crucial role in building consumer confidence.

However, the effectiveness of these signals is influenced by their perceived credibility. Third-party certifications are generally considered more trustworthy than self-declared claims, as they provide independent verification. Nevertheless, the proliferation of labels and certifications has created confusion among consumers, potentially undermining their effectiveness.

Greenwashing remains a significant challenge in this context. Misleading or exaggerated sustainability claims can erode

trust and create scepticism toward ethical branding efforts. Once trust is compromised, it is difficult to restore, highlighting the importance of maintaining transparency and integrity in branding practices (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

5.3 The Persistence of the Intention-Behaviour Gap

Despite positive attitudes toward eco-fashion, the intention-behaviour gap persists as a major barrier to sustainable consumption. Consumers often express a willingness to support ethical brands but fail to translate these intentions into actual purchasing behaviour (Carrington et al., 2010).

Several factors contribute to this discrepancy. Economic considerations, particularly price sensitivity, are among the most significant barriers. Eco-fashion products are often priced higher than conventional alternatives due to the costs associated with sustainable materials and ethical production processes. As a result, consumers may prioritise affordability over sustainability.

In addition to economic factors, convenience and accessibility also play a critical role. Limited availability of eco-fashion products can discourage consumers from making sustainable choices. This is particularly evident in regions where sustainable fashion markets are still developing.

Psychological factors further complicate the relationship between intention and behaviour. Habitual purchasing patterns, perceived effort, and lack of immediate benefits can hinder the adoption of sustainable consumption practices. These findings align

with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which emphasises the role of perceived behavioural control in shaping behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

5.4 The Role of Price Sensitivity and Perceived Value

Price sensitivity is a recurring theme in the analysis of consumer perceptions. While consumers recognise the value of sustainable fashion, they often perceive eco-fashion products as expensive and inaccessible. This perception limits the market reach of ethical brands and reinforces the intention-behaviour gap.

However, perceived value extends beyond price considerations. Consumers evaluate eco-fashion products based on a combination of functional, emotional, and ethical attributes. When ethical benefits are clearly communicated and aligned with product quality, consumers may be willing to pay a premium.

Research suggests that value-driven consumers are more likely to prioritise sustainability over price, particularly when they perceive a strong alignment between their personal values and the brand's ethical commitments (McNeill & Moore, 2015). This highlights the importance of targeted marketing strategies that emphasise value rather than cost.

5.5 Transparency and Information Asymmetry

Information asymmetry is a significant challenge in eco-fashion markets. Consumers often lack access to reliable and comprehensive information about the environmental and social impact of products.

This uncertainty can lead to scepticism and reduce the effectiveness of ethical branding.

Transparency is essential for addressing this issue. Brands that provide detailed information about their supply chains, production processes, and sustainability initiatives are more likely to gain consumer trust. Transparency not only reduces information asymmetry but also enhances perceived credibility.

Technological innovations, such as blockchain and digital labelling, are emerging as tools for improving transparency in the fashion industry. These technologies enable consumers to trace the origin of products and verify sustainability claims, thereby enhancing trust and accountability (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

5.6 Aesthetic and Functional Expectations

While sustainability is an important consideration, consumers do not compromise on aesthetic and functional attributes. Eco-fashion products must meet the same standards of style, quality, and comfort as conventional fashion items. Failure to do so can undermine the appeal of ethical branding.

This finding highlights the need for a holistic approach to product development, where sustainability is integrated with design and functionality. Brands that successfully combine ethical practices with high-quality design are more likely to attract and retain consumers.

5.7 Social Influence and Normative Pressures

Social influence plays a significant role in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviour. Subjective norms, as described in the Theory of Planned Behaviour, reflect the influence of social expectations and peer behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

The rise of social media has amplified the impact of social influence by promoting sustainable lifestyles and raising awareness about ethical issues. Influencers and opinion leaders play a crucial role in shaping consumer attitudes and encouraging sustainable consumption.

However, social influence can also create pressure to conform, which may not always translate into genuine behavioural change. This underscores the complexity of consumer behaviour in eco-fashion markets.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the relationship between ethical branding and consumer perceptions in eco-fashion markets. By integrating theoretical perspectives with empirical evidence, this discussion highlights the broader implications of the findings and identifies key challenges and opportunities for ethical branding.

6.1 Ethical Branding as a Strategic Imperative

The analysis confirms that ethical branding is no longer a peripheral strategy but a central component of competitive positioning in the fashion industry. As consumers become more

environmentally and socially conscious, brands are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability.

From a Stakeholder Theory perspective, ethical branding reflects a shift toward more inclusive and responsible business practices (Freeman, 1984). By addressing the concerns of multiple stakeholders, including consumers, employees, and the environment, brands can create long-term value and enhance their reputation.

However, the effectiveness of ethical branding depends on its authenticity. Superficial or inconsistent efforts are likely to be perceived as greenwashing, which can damage brand credibility and erode consumer trust. This highlights the need for a genuine and integrated approach to sustainability.

6.2 Bridging the Intention-Behaviour Gap

The persistence of the intention-behaviour gap represents a significant challenge for eco-fashion brands. While consumers express strong support for sustainability, their purchasing decisions are often influenced by practical considerations such as price and convenience.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour provides a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon. It suggests that behaviour is influenced not only by attitudes but also by perceived behavioural control and social norms (Ajzen, 1991). Therefore, efforts to promote sustainable consumption must address these factors.

Brands can bridge the intention-behaviour gap by improving accessibility, reducing costs, and enhancing the convenience of eco-fashion products. For example, adopting scalable production methods and leveraging economies of scale can help reduce prices. Similarly, expanding distribution channels can improve accessibility.

6.3 The Critical Role of Trust and Transparency

Trust emerges as a cornerstone of ethical branding. In the absence of direct knowledge about sustainability practices, consumers rely on trust to evaluate brand claims. This underscores the importance of transparency and credible communication.

Signalling Theory highlights the role of signals in reducing information asymmetry and building trust (Connelly et al., 2011). However, the proliferation of signals in the form of labels and certifications has created complexity and confusion. To address this issue, there is a need for standardised and widely recognised certification systems.

Transparency should extend beyond marketing communication to include all aspects of the value chain. Brands that provide detailed and verifiable information about their practices are more likely to gain consumer confidence and differentiate themselves in the market.

6.4 Addressing Greenwashing and Consumer Scepticism

The prevalence of greenwashing poses a significant threat to the credibility of ethical branding. Consumers are increasingly

sceptical of sustainability claims, particularly when they are not supported by evidence.

Addressing this challenge requires a combination of regulatory oversight, industry standards, and corporate accountability. Governments and industry bodies can play a role in establishing clear guidelines and enforcing compliance. At the same time, brands must take responsibility for ensuring the accuracy and transparency of their claims.

Building long-term trust requires consistency and accountability. Brands must demonstrate their commitment to sustainability through tangible actions rather than relying solely on marketing messages.

6.5 Integrating Sustainability with Consumer Expectations

The findings highlight the importance of integrating sustainability with other product attributes, such as design, quality, and functionality. Consumers are unlikely to adopt eco-fashion if it requires significant compromises in these areas.

This suggests that ethical branding should not be treated as a separate dimension but as an integral part of the overall value proposition. By aligning sustainability with consumer expectations, brands can enhance their appeal and increase adoption rates.

6.6 Implications for Theory and Practice

From a theoretical perspective, this study demonstrates the value of integrating multiple frameworks to understand consumer behaviour in eco-fashion markets. Stakeholder Theory, Signalling Theory, and TPB provide complementary insights into the

ethical, communicative, and psychological dimensions of ethical branding.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer several implications for fashion brands:

- Emphasise authenticity and transparency in ethical branding
- Invest in credible certifications and clear communication
- Address price and accessibility barriers
- Align sustainability with design and quality
- Leverage social influence to promote sustainable consumption

6.7 Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights, it also highlights areas for future research. Empirical studies using primary data could provide more context-specific insights into consumer behaviour. Additionally, research on emerging technologies, such as blockchain, could further explore their role in enhancing transparency and trust.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of ethical branding and its influence on consumer perceptions in eco-fashion markets. As the fashion industry faces increasing scrutiny for its environmental and social impacts, the importance of integrating sustainability into branding strategies has become more pronounced. Ethical branding has emerged as a powerful tool for communicating corporate responsibility, enhancing brand image, and building consumer trust.

The findings demonstrate that ethical branding positively influences consumer perceptions by associating brands with values such as sustainability, transparency, and social responsibility. These associations contribute to increased brand equity and foster stronger emotional connections with consumers. However, the study also highlights that positive perceptions do not automatically translate into purchasing behaviour. The persistence of the intention-behaviour gap remains a significant challenge, as consumers often prioritise factors such as price, convenience, and product aesthetics over ethical considerations.

Trust is identified as a central element in the effectiveness of ethical branding. Consumers rely on trust to evaluate the credibility of sustainability claims, particularly in a market characterised by information asymmetry. Transparent communication, supported by credible certifications and verifiable practices, plays a crucial role in building and maintaining this trust. Conversely, the prevalence of greenwashing undermines consumer confidence and emphasises the need for authenticity and accountability in branding efforts.

The study also underscores the importance of aligning sustainability with consumer expectations. Ethical attributes alone are insufficient to drive adoption; eco-fashion products must also meet standards of quality, design, and functionality. This finding suggests that sustainability should be integrated into the overall value proposition rather than treated as an isolated feature.

From a theoretical perspective, the integration of Stakeholder Theory, Signalling Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour provides a robust framework for understanding the complex dynamics of ethical branding and consumer behaviour. These theories collectively highlight the ethical responsibilities of firms, the importance of credible communication, and the psychological factors influencing consumer decision-making.

In practical terms, the study offers several implications for fashion brands. Companies should prioritise transparency, invest in credible signalling mechanisms, and address barriers such as price and accessibility. Additionally, leveraging social influence and digital technologies can enhance consumer engagement and promote sustainable consumption.

In conclusion, ethical branding represents both an opportunity and a challenge for the fashion industry. While it has the potential to drive positive change and create competitive advantage, its success depends on the ability of brands to align ethical commitments with consumer expectations and market realities. Future research should explore emerging innovations and context-specific strategies to further advance sustainable practices in eco-fashion markets.

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