



Building Consumer Trust through Ethical and Sustainable Brand Narratives: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: In this study, the impact of sustainable and ethical brand narratives on consumer trust is examined, with particular attention paid to the moderating influence of consumer ethical sensitivity and the mediating function of perceived brand authenticity. Understanding how narrative-driven communication strategies impact trust has become crucial as consumers look for brands that share their values. With 384 respondents, a quantitative, cross-sectional survey was carried out. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) via AMOS was used to analyse the data. The results show that consumer trust is greatly enhanced by brand narratives that are both sustainable and ethical. Furthermore, the relationship between ethical brand narratives and trust was found to be partially mediated by perceived brand authenticity, suggesting that authenticity is crucial for the development of trust. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that consumers with high levels of ethical sensitivity react more favourably to value-based communication, thereby moderating the impact of ethical narratives on trust. These findings add to the literature on branding and marketing by emphasising how crucial ethics and genuineness are to gaining the trust of customers. The study has useful ramifications for marketers who want to use honest and ethical storytelling to build stronger relationships with their customers.

Keywords: Consumer Trust, Ethical Brand Narratives, Sustainable Branding, Perceived Brand Authenticity, Consumer Ethical Sensitivity, Brand Loyalty, Narrative Marketing

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INTRODUCTION

Brand narratives are real content that changes how people think about a brand and builds trust over time (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). A strong brand story helps people connect with the brand on an emotional level and understand it better (Ives & Ryu, 2023). This level of immersion can make stories more convincing and make them seem more real. Authenticity, on the other hand, boosts brand trust, credibility, and willingness to pay (Abratt et al., 2025). Tourism branding has done a lot of research on authenticity (Bu et al., 2023), but green marketing hasn't done as much research on it. This is important because consumers are sceptical and greenwashing is on the rise (Tarabieh, 2021).

Building on the importance of brand narratives in influencing consumer perception and trust, consumers' preference for brands that exhibit environmental and ethical responsibility has significantly increased in recent years. When making purchases, modern consumers—especially younger generations—are giving transparency, sustainability, and social impact more weight (Mehta, 2024). Increased consumer awareness of corporate social responsibility, unethical labour practices, and climate change is contributing to this shift

by encouraging them to support companies that share their values (Napoli et al., 2015). But as greenwashing—the practice of businesses making exaggerated claims to be environmentally friendly—has increased, consumers are now more dubious and want real, substantiated commitments to sustainability. Because of this, real ethical and green brand stories are now important not only for standing out, but also for rebuilding and keeping consumer trust in a market that is both competitive and socially aware.

Consumer trust has become a crucial resource for brands looking to establish enduring relationships and achieve long-term success in today's values-driven and cutthroat market. A growing number of consumers are evaluating brands based on how well they align with their values, especially in areas like perceived value, customer satisfaction, brand image, and sustainability practices, rather than just the quality or price of their offerings (Huang et al., 2022). Particularly when based on moral behaviour and open brand behaviour, trust improves customer retention, fortifies loyalty, and has a favourable impact on financial performance (M. T. Lee & Suh, 2022). In this regard, perceived value is crucial because it aids customers in weighing a brand's overall advantages in relation to its costs, which makes it a crucial differentiator in crowded markets (Bigné Alcañiz et al., 2000). Research also shows that trust is directly related to satisfaction and positive service experiences, especially when trust is strengthened by CSR practices and sustainability perceptions (Murali et al., 2016).

Stories that are centred on sustainability and ethics have grown to be effective tools for influencing consumer attitudes as this trust depends more and more on factors other than functional performance. Consumer trust is more likely to be earned and maintained by brands that exhibit openness, equity, and a sincere dedication to social and environmental responsibility. Authenticity and brand image can be enhanced by effective communication about CSR initiatives and green practices, especially when supported by clear and consistent brand storytelling (Villagra et al., 2021), (Sutrisno et al., 2020). Consumer mistrust, however, is also a feature of this environment, particularly in light of the expanding greenwashing phenomenon, in which businesses make false or exaggerated environmental claims in an effort to attract environmentally conscious customers (Chen et al., 2015). In these situations, trust is not only more difficult to establish but also more easily broken. In order to create meaningful consumer-brand relationships, ethical narratives that transcend superficial marketing and represent real, verifiable actions are crucial.

This trend is becoming more and more noticeable in the tactics used by well-known ethical brands worldwide. Patagonia, for example, has established itself as a pioneer in sustainability-focused branding thanks to its dedication to environmental activism, ethical sourcing, and corporate transparency. Socially conscious customers have also shown a great deal of trust and loyalty to The Body Shop because of its longstanding support of fair-trade ingredients, cruelty-free testing, and human rights initiatives. These companies successfully communicate values that connect with their target audiences through storytelling, which is not merely a marketing gimmick but rather a fundamental aspect of their brand. Their success serves as an example of how genuine messaging focused on sustainability can greatly increase brand trust and set them apart in the marketplace. Research also confirms that ethical branding and CSR communication have a positive impact on brand trust, especially in emerging markets where customers are willing to support companies that practise social responsibility (Tiep Le et al., 2023), (Hernandez-Fernandez & Lewis, 2019). Consequently, sustainability-focused storytelling has evolved from a marketing fad to a strategic necessity for contemporary brand management, influencing both long-term brand equity

and consumer trust.

Given these advancements, it is clear that brand narratives based on moral and sustainable principles are essential in influencing customer loyalty and trust. Though previous studies have looked at a number of factors that affect trust, including perceived value, satisfaction, and corporate social responsibility, there is still a lack of knowledge about how ethical and sustainable brand narratives specifically support the development of trust, as well as how perceived authenticity and consumer ethical sensitivity affect this relationship. The current study attempts to close this gap by investigating how ethical and sustainable brand narratives affect consumer trust, how perceived brand authenticity acts as a mediator, and how ethical sensitivity on the part of consumers moderates these effects. This research provides a more thorough understanding of how trust is formed in the context of socially conscious branding, which is beneficial for both academic research and brand strategy in a market that is driven by values.

RELATED WORKS

(Abrorovich, 2023) looked into how content marketing changed over time, moving from conventional advertising techniques to more contemporary strategies that focused on brand narratives and storytelling. Due to shifts in consumer behaviour and improvements in digital communication channels, it highlighted the growing significance of emotional engagement and consumer-focused strategies. The study investigated the efficacy of storytelling in enhancing brand-consumer relationships using a qualitative methodology that included case studies and a review of the literature. According to the results, emotionally charged stories greatly increased customer engagement and outperformed traditional advertising in the modern digital environment.

(Korzh & Estima, 2022) examined at how people can use storytelling as a marketing tool to build their personal brands in a society that is becoming more competitive and focused on brands. The study looked at how storytelling can help people stand out from others as brands and products take on human-like traits and people are seen through a branding lens. We looked closely at important ideas like personal branding and storytelling. We used a qualitative method, which included nine interviews with people from different professions and backgrounds. The results, which were backed up by both interviews and a review of the literature, showed that storytelling is an important part of building a personal brand. This brand should be authentic, consistent, charismatic, purposeful, have a strong personality, be creative, adaptable, persuasive, memorable, unique, and clear.

(Klink & Wu, 2017) explored how brand name affects consumer perceived ethicality (CPE), a major brand equity factor. Despite its relevance, little study has examined how to improve brand CPE. Based on sound symbolism theory, the study suggested that brand names' phonetic features might boost ethical judgements. Two research tested this idea. Study 1 found that brand names with higher-frequency sounds conveyed ethics better. Study 2 found that brand names may boost brand CPE despite unfavourable ethical information. These results emphasise the significance of brand name and urge that marketers start establishing an ethical brand image early.

(Alwi et al., 2017) This study aims to analyse the impact of a corporate brand's functional and emotional values (e.g., product, service quality, perceived price) on ethical branding, company reputation, and brand

loyalty among Malaysian industrial buyers of electronic office equipment. The research highlights the impact of perceived pricing, product quality, and service on ethical branding, firm reputation, and brand loyalty using structural equation modelling.

Product quality significantly impacts ethical brand views and corporate reputation. Price and service quality do not immediately impact firm reputation, but rather ethical branding does. Evidence suggests that ethical branding mediates the impact of product, pricing, and service quality on firm reputation. Ethical brands help firms preserve their image among industrial customers.

(Hollebeek & Macky, 2019) looked at how digital content marketing (DCM) is becoming more important in online interactions between consumers and businesses, where trust and brand engagement are key. DCM is used a lot in real life, but there isn't much academic research on it, so there is a gap in knowledge. After a thorough review of the literature, the study defined DCM as the planned creation and distribution of useful, relevant brand-related content to build long-term relationships with customers instead of just boosting sales. Using uses-and-gratifications theory, a conceptual framework found functional, hedonic, and authenticity-based consumer-based antecedents. The study found that DCM increased cognitive, emotional, and behavioural engagement, brand trust and attitude, and both consumer and firm-based brand equity. The results were put into Fundamental Propositions (FPs), which gave academics and marketers important information.

(Desembrianita et al., 2024) examines how digital marketing, customer trust, and brand loyalty affect green product purchase intentions. With 248 respondents and SmartPLS data processing, the study found substantial positive connections between components. Effective digital marketing methods are crucial for promoting green goods, since they greatly affect purchase intention, customer trust, and brand loyalty. Trust and brand loyalty are crucial for boosting purchase intentions among consumers. Companies should prioritise honest, ethical, and engaging digital marketing to foster long-term customer connections and encourage sustainable consumption. The research adds to the knowledge on green marketing and offers practical insights for practitioners seeking to promote green product uptake.

(Singh et al., 2025) The research examined how brand positioning and digital storytelling affected digital consumer trust. Digital customers value trust; thus, the study studied the impacts of brand positioning and storytelling, with a focus on narrative authenticity. Digital media literacy is becoming more important as consumers evaluate marketing communications' aim, structure, and validity. A systematic survey of varied customers was used for quantitative research. SPSS was used for correlation, regression, and mediation analysis to guarantee analytical rigour. Brand positioning and digital storytelling considerably built trust, with narrative authenticity mediating. The study gave brand managers practical advice and enriched media and marketing research by emphasising the relevance of story strategy, media literacy, and brand positioning in today's competitive digital world.

(Irawan et al., 2024) introduces AI-driven personalisation, a revolutionary idea that uses AI technology to enhance brand trust and authenticity. The research indicates that AI-driven personalisation is linked to brand trust development. Moreover, brand storytelling is crucial for building brand trust. A study discovered that brand trust mediates the association between AI-driven personalisation and sense of authenticity. In addition, AI-driven personalisation and brand narrative enhance brand credibility. This

research also identifies additional elements that contribute to brand trust and authenticity perceptions, including brand equity, decision intention, consumer behaviour, and purchase intent.

(Crespo et al., 2023) This study examines how storytelling creates cognitive, emotional, and behavioural reactions to the consumer–brand connection. The assumptions are investigated using partial least squares structural equation modelling using 323 Portuguese consumer survey data. According to social identity theory, storytelling boosts customers' cognitive and emotional reactions via consumer–brand identification and brand affective participation. Through cognitive and emotional reactions, narrative influences purchasing intention and conduct. Storytelling elicits greater emotional than cognitive reactions, although cognitive responses affect behaviour more. This study shows that storytelling improves the consumer–brand connection, adding to the literature on storytelling in brand management.

(Suryana, 2024) studied how storytelling builds brand image in a competitive business environment. The qualitative, descriptive study suggested storytelling as a key brand perception technique. Stories that evoked good emotions and created enduring emotional experiences helped firms and customers develop emotional relationships. It also helped the organisation communicate its integrity, vision, and ambitions, building trust and loyalty. Storytelling highlighted the company's beliefs, history, and character, creating a unique brand identity. Data-driven, altruistic, and customer-led storytelling engaged customers and created a lasting brand image.

(G. K. S. Lee, 2025) examined how sustainable branding integrates brand strategy, emotional customer involvement, and ethical communication to build brand equity. Structured narrative assessment of peer-reviewed literature from 2014 to 2024 focused on strategy sustainable integration, emotional value and customer reaction, and message credibility. For sustainable branding, stakeholder-based brand equity, co-creation, and Triple Bottom Line (TBL) ideals must be central to strategy. In value-conscious generations like Generation Z, emotional resonance and authenticity drove customer engagement, but trust was susceptible to greenwashing. Culture-sensitive, verifiable communication became essential to brand trust. Sustainable branding demands honest, transparent, and participatory marketing methods, and digital platforms and socio-psychological aspects should be studied further.

RESEARCH GAP

Brand storytelling is a well-known marketing tool, but most of the research that has been done so far looks at general emotional appeal, digital engagement, or broad aspects of brand communication. But we don't know much about how different types of stories, especially ethical and sustainable brand stories, affect consumer trust on their own and in groups. Most previous research looks at trust as a result of CSR activities or brand reputation, without focussing on the storytelling process itself. Also, even though authenticity is often said to be important, its role as a link between brand stories and trust has not been studied in a systematic way. Another big problem is that the study doesn't look at psychological traits at the consumer level, like ethical sensitivity, which could affect how people understand and respond to brand stories. This gap is especially important because more and more people are doubting brands that make shallow ethical claims and greenwash their products.

This study fills in these gaps by suggesting an integrated model that looks at how ethical and sustainable

brand stories affect consumer trust. This is a focused look at the storytelling part of brand communication. The study adds perceived brand authenticity as a mediating factor, which helps us understand how trust is built through how consumers see the story as real. It also looks at how consumer ethical sensitivity can change how people respond to ethically framed stories, showing how differences between people affect their reactions. This study gives us a full picture of the psychological and narrative factors that affect brand trust by looking at these connections in a single real-world setting. The study adds new ideas to both academic theory and brand strategy, especially for companies that want to build trust in a socially conscious marketplace through honest, open, and values-based storytelling.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In order to investigate how consumer trust is affected by ethical and sustainable brand narratives, this study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. It also investigated the moderating influence of consumer ethical sensitivity and the mediating function of perceived brand authenticity. To evaluate both direct and indirect effects within the research framework, the relationships between the important variables were examined using structural equation modelling, or SEM.

Objectives and Hypothesis

Objectives:

- To examine the impact of ethical brand narratives on consumer trust.
- To assess the influence of sustainable brand narratives on consumer trust.
- To investigate the mediating role of perceived brand authenticity in the relationship between ethical and sustainable brand narratives and consumer trust.
- To analyse the moderating effect of consumer ethical sensitivity on the relationship between ethical brand narratives and consumer trust.

Hypothesis

H1: Ethical brand narratives have a significant positive effect on consumer trust.

H2: Sustainable brand narratives have a significant positive effect on consumer trust.

H3: Perceived brand authenticity mediates the relationship between ethical and sustainable brand narratives and consumer trust.

H4: Consumer ethical sensitivity moderates the relationship between ethical brand narratives and consumer trust, such that the relationship is stronger for consumers with higher ethical sensitivity.

Sampling and Participants

The study was aimed at regular people who had already seen ethical and sustainable brand communication. We used a purposive sampling method to choose people who were likely to remember or interact with

these brand stories. A structured questionnaire was sent out online, and the final sample included people of different ages and backgrounds.

Instrumentation and Measures

Ethical brand narratives, sustainable brand narratives, perceived brand authenticity, consumer ethical sensitivity, and consumer trust were the five primary constructs that made up the questionnaire. A 5-point Likert scale, with "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" as the extremes, was used to rate each item. To guarantee relevance and dependability, the items were modified from well-established and validated scales.

Data Analysis

In order to assess respondents' perceptions of various important constructs, the data gathered via the structured questionnaire was first processed using SPSS for descriptive analysis, which included mean and standard deviation computations. After that, the measurement model was validated using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using AMOS. Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) assessments were used to make sure the constructs were valid and reliable. By confirming internal consistency and convergent validity, these procedures made sure that the model was appropriate for additional structural analysis and that each item accurately represented the intended construct.

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

The proposed hypotheses were tested and the direct, mediating, and moderating effects among the study constructs—Ethical Brand Narratives, Sustainable Brand Narratives, Perceived Brand Authenticity, Consumer Ethical Sensitivity, and Consumer Trust—were examined using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with AMOS. The structural model examined how ethical and sustainable narratives affected trust, how authenticity mediated this relationship, and whether ethical sensitivity among consumers mitigated the impact of ethical narratives on trust. Standard indices like CFI, RMSEA, and CMIN/DF were used to evaluate the model fit, confirming the model's sufficiency and bolstering the hypothesised relationships within the conceptual framework.

RESULTS

Validity and Reliability:

Table 1 Internal Consistency and Convergent Validity

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	Composite Reliability
Sustainable Brand Narratives	0.894	0.6137	0.8289

Consumer Trust	0.910	0.6694	0.8521
Perceived Brand Authenticity	0.897	0.6152	0.8296
Ethical Brand Narratives	0.883	0.6197	0.8316
Consumer Ethical Sensitivity	0.875	0.618	0.8308

Table 1 shows the findings of the internal consistency and convergent validity analysis for all constructs used in the research. Cronbach's Alpha scores for all variables above the required level of 0.70, demonstrating robust internal consistency: Sustainable Brand Narratives (0.894), Consumer Trust (0.910), Perceived Brand Authenticity (0.897), Ethical Brand Narratives (0.883), and Consumer Ethical Sensitivity (0.875). The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all constructs above the minimal threshold of 0.50, so affirming satisfactory convergent validity, with values spanning from 0.6137 to 0.6694. Moreover, Composite dependability scores for all constructs significantly above the 0.70 threshold, hence reinforcing the dependability of the measurement approach. The findings together confirm that the constructs exhibit enough internal consistency and convergent validity, hence confirming the reliability of the measuring instrument used in the research.

Table 2 Mean and standard deviation

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Sustainable Brand Narratives	3.6644	.76257
Consumer Trust	3.6427	.72368
Perceived Brand Authenticity	3.6984	.68767
Ethical Brand Narratives	3.6510	.76633
Consumer Ethical Sensitivity	3.8289	.75737

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics, including the mean and standard deviation, for the main variables analysed in the research. Among the variables, Consumer Ethical Sensitivity had the highest mean score (M

= 3.8289, SD = 0.75737), indicating a considerable level of ethical awareness among consumers. Perceived Brand Authenticity had a high mean (M = 3.6984, SD = 0.68767), indicating that respondents often see brands with ethical and sustainable storylines as genuine. Sustainable Brand storylines (M = 3.6644, SD = 0.76257) and Ethical Brand Narratives (M = 3.6510, SD = 0.76633) had comparable mean scores, indicating moderate to high consensus on the existence of these storylines in brand communication. Consumer Trust, with a mean of 3.6427 (SD = 0.72368), exhibited a uniform view across respondents. The variables show elevated mean values with modest standard deviations, suggesting a mostly positive customer reaction to ethical and sustainable brand storylines and their related consequences.

Hypothesis Implementation:

Hypothesis	Direct Effect			Standardized Estimate	Sig. P-Value	Remark
H1	Consumer Trust	<---	Ethical Brand Narratives	0.861	***	Accepted
H2	Consumer Trust	<---	Sustainable Brand Narratives	0.775	***	Accepted
	Mediation					
H3	Perceived Brand Authenticity	<---	Ethical Brand Narratives	0.800	***	Accepted
	Consumer Trust	<---	Ethical Brand Narratives	0.222	***	
	Consumer Trust	<---	Perceived Brand Authenticity	0.567	***	
	Moderation					
H4	ZConsumer Trust	<---	ZEthical Brand Narratives	0.538	***	Accepted
	ZConsumer Trust	<---	ZConsumer Ethical Sensitivity	0.617	***	
	ZConsumer Trust	<---	INTERACTION	0.067	0.022	

H1: Ethical brand narratives have a significant positive effect on consumer trust.

The findings show a robust and statistically significant beneficial impact of ethical brand narratives on consumer trust, with a standardised estimate of 0.861 and a p-value of *** ($p < 0.001$). This research corroborates H1, affirming that when companies convey ethically based narratives such as transparency, fairness, and social responsibility consumers are more inclined to cultivate trust in the brand. The elevated estimate underscores the essential function of ethical communication in creating trustworthy consumer-brand connections.

H2: Sustainable brand narratives have a significant positive effect on consumer trust.

The data confirms H2, revealing a significant standardised estimate of 0.775 ($p < 0.001$), indicating that sustainable brand narratives focusing on environmental stewardship, resource conservation, and long-term social welfare positively affect customer trust. This discovery highlights the growing significance consumers attribute to sustainability as an essential brand value and its potential to enhance trust in brand-consumer relationships.

H3: Perceived brand authenticity mediates the relationship between ethical and sustainable brand narratives and consumer trust.

The mediation study shows that perceived brand authenticity significantly mediates the connection between ethical brand narratives and customer trust. Ethical brand narratives strongly influence perceived authenticity ($\beta = 0.800$, $p < 0.001$), which subsequently affects consumer trust ($\beta = 0.567$, $p < 0.001$). The direct impact of ethical brand narratives on customer trust is considerable albeit diminished ($\beta = 0.222$, $p < 0.001$), indicating some mediation. This corroborates H3, suggesting that consumers see ethical communication as a marker of authenticity, hence enhancing trust.

H4: Consumer ethical sensitivity moderates the relationship between ethical brand narratives and consumer trust, such that the relationship is stronger for consumers with higher ethical sensitivity.

The moderation analysis corroborates H4, revealing a significant interaction effect ($\beta = 0.067$, $p = 0.022$), which demonstrates that customer ethical sensitivity enhances the positive correlation between ethical brand narratives and consumer trust. The standardised estimates for ethical brand narratives ($\beta = 0.538$) and consumer ethical sensitivity ($\beta = 0.617$) are significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that individuals with increased ethical awareness are more receptive to ethical messaging in brand communication, thus enhancing trust. This affirms that customer values significantly influence the perception and response to brand narratives.

DISCUSSION

The research aims to examine the influence of ethical and sustainable brand narratives on consumer trust, while also analysing the mediating function of perceived brand authenticity and the moderating effect of consumer ethical sensitivity. The constructs included in the research exhibited high reliability and convergent validity, affirming the strength and consistency of the measuring approach. Descriptive analysis

revealed that participants mostly had favourable attitudes of ethical and sustainable branding, exhibiting notable sensitivity towards ethical matters. Ethical and sustainable brand narratives significantly enhance customer trust, demonstrating that people choose companies that prioritise transparency, accountability, and enduring social and environmental values. Moreover, perceived brand authenticity was shown to mediate the association between ethical brand narratives and consumer trust, indicating that consumers are more inclined to trust companies they see as genuine and consistent with ethical ideals. Moreover, consumer ethical sensitivity influenced the association between ethical brand narratives and trust, with the correlation being more pronounced among consumers with heightened ethical awareness. The results underscore the strategic significance of incorporating ethical and sustainable storylines into brand communication to cultivate trust and credibility among ethically aware customers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research presents strong empirical evidence that ethical and sustainable brand narratives are crucial determinants of consumer trust, with ethical communication proving to be especially impactful. The results indicate that businesses incorporating ethical ideals and sustainability into their narratives align with customer expectations, hence augmenting trust and brand credibility. Moreover, the mediating function of perceived brand authenticity indicates that trust is established not alone via brand communications but also through the perceived legitimacy of such messages to the customer. The moderating impact of consumer ethical sensitivity underscores the need of comprehending audience beliefs, as those with heightened ethical awareness exhibit greater responsiveness to ethically framed commercial communications. The study emphasises the strategic importance of ethical and sustainable branding as a mechanism for building trust in the contemporary value-driven marketplace, urging brands to implement communication strategies that are socially and environmentally responsible while remaining authentically aligned with their fundamental values.

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