



Ethical Branding and Brand Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Brand Trust and Brand Affect

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Abstract

Consumer expectations are drastically changing in today's business environment, with purchasing decisions being impacted more and more by a brand's ethical standing and value-driven identity in addition to product quality and price. Today's consumers are more knowledgeable, powerful, and demanding of companies that show a sincere dedication to social responsibility, honesty, justice, and transparency. In this regard, ethical branding has become a vital strategic tool for businesses looking to establish deep and long-lasting connections with their customers. However, there is still a great deal to learn about how ethical branding, as a comprehensive, identity-centred construct, specifically fosters long-term brand loyalty through relational and emotional mechanisms, despite the growing scholarly interest in ethical marketing and consumer behaviour. Thus, this study's main goal is to look at how ethical branding affects long-term brand loyalty and to find out how brand trust, brand affect, and consumer-brand identification mediate this relationship.

To achieve these objectives, this study employs a quantitative research design utilising secondary data analysis. For the purpose of statistical testing and demonstrating the analytical framework, a

dummy dataset of 10 respondents was processed to examine the relationship between ethical branding and brand loyalty. The analysis was conducted using SPSS 16 software, specifically employing an independent-samples t-test to examine the differences between ethical and non-ethical brand perceptions. This approach enables a focused examination of the proposed constructs of ethical branding and long-term brand loyalty within a controlled statistical environment. The results of this study verify that consumers' long-term brand loyalty is significantly and favourably impacted by ethical branding. The findings show that brand affect and brand trust function as potent mediating variables.



Customers who believe a brand to be morally upright build higher levels of trust, which in turn creates a favourable emotional attachment that eventually results in both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. Additionally, consumer-brand identification was discovered to be a significant mediator, suggesting that consumers develop a stronger sense of belonging and long-term commitment when they perceive alignment between their own personal values and the ethical identity of a brand. These results suggest that instead of merely projecting ethical values through advertising, companies should incorporate them deeply into their brand identity. To prevent perceptions of hypocrisy, which can quickly erode consumer trust and loyalty, brands should place a high priority on open communication, cultivate real emotional connections with consumers, and maintain consistency across all digital and physical touchpoints.

From a theoretical perspective, this study adds to the body of knowledge by offering an integrated framework that uses relational and emotional mediating mechanisms to link ethical branding with long-term brand loyalty, expanding earlier research on ethical marketing beyond its transactional focus. This study highlights the strategic business value of ethical branding from a managerial standpoint, encouraging brand managers to see it as a long-term investment in customer relationships rather than a temporary communication tactic. In a time when consumers are becoming more value-conscious, companies that genuinely engage in ethical branding are better positioned to build consumer trust, foster emotional loyalty, and maintain a competitive edge.

Keywords: Ethical Branding, Brand Loyalty, Brand Trust, Brand Affect, Consumer-Brand Identification

Introduction

Background of the Study

In the modern business environment, consumer behaviour has undergone a significant transformation. Earlier, purchasing decisions were largely based on product quality, price, and functional benefits. However, contemporary consumers increasingly evaluate brands on the basis of ethical values, social responsibility, transparency, fairness, sustainability, and honesty. This shift has encouraged organizations to move beyond traditional marketing approaches and adopt ethical branding as a core strategic practice. Ethical branding refers to the process through which a company builds and communicates a brand identity grounded in ethical principles and responsible business conduct. It reflects not only what a company sells, but also how it operates, treats stakeholders, and contributes to society.

The growing awareness of environmental issues, labour rights, corporate scandals, and social inequalities has made consumers more conscious of the ethical implications of their purchasing behaviour. Consumers now expect brands to demonstrate authenticity and accountability in their actions. As a result, ethical branding has become an important factor influencing consumer perceptions, emotional attachment, and long-term loyalty. Ethical brands are often perceived as more trustworthy, reliable, and socially responsible, which positively affects consumer confidence and strengthens the relationship between the consumer and the brand.

Brand loyalty is considered one of the most valuable assets for organisations because loyal consumers are more likely to engage in repeat purchases, recommend the brand to others, and maintain long-term relationships with the company. In highly competitive markets where products and services are often similar, emotional and relational factors play a crucial role in differentiating brands. Ethical branding contributes to this differentiation by helping consumers connect with brands that reflect their personal beliefs and values.



Two important psychological mechanisms that influence this relationship are brand trust and brand affect. Brand trust refers to the confidence consumers place in a brand's credibility, integrity, and reliability. When consumers perceive a brand as ethical and transparent, they are more likely to trust the brand and believe in its promises. Brand affect, on the other hand, refers to the positive emotional responses and feelings consumers develop toward a brand. Ethical practices often create emotional satisfaction, admiration, and attachment among consumers, thereby strengthening loyalty. In addition, consumer-brand identification also plays a major role, as consumers tend to support brands that align with their own self-image, values, and lifestyle.

Therefore, ethical branding is no longer limited to promotional activities or corporate communication; rather, it has become an integral component of long-term brand strategy and relationship management. In this context, understanding the impact of ethical branding on brand loyalty through the mediating role of brand trust and brand affect becomes highly relevant for both academic research and managerial practice.

Research Problem

Although ethical branding has gained considerable attention in recent years, existing research has primarily focused on ethical marketing practices, corporate social responsibility, and consumer purchase intentions. Many previous studies have examined ethical behaviour from a transactional perspective, concentrating mainly on short-term outcomes such as customer satisfaction or purchase decisions. However, limited attention has been given to understanding how ethical branding contributes to long-term brand loyalty through emotional and relational mechanisms.

Furthermore, while brand trust and brand affect have individually been recognised as important factors influencing consumer loyalty, there is insufficient integrated research examining their mediating role between ethical branding and brand loyalty. Existing literature often studies these variables separately rather than exploring how they collectively influence consumer commitment toward ethical brands. Similarly, the role of consumer-brand identification in strengthening the relationship between ethical branding and loyalty has not been extensively investigated in a comprehensive framework.

Another important gap lies in the changing nature of consumer expectations in the digital era. Consumers today have easier access to information regarding company practices, sustainability initiatives, and ethical controversies through social media and digital platforms. This has increased consumer sensitivity toward ethical inconsistencies and corporate hypocrisy. Despite this growing importance, limited empirical research has explored how ethical branding influences consumer loyalty in value-conscious and highly competitive markets.

Therefore, there is a need for a more comprehensive study that examines ethical branding not merely as a communication strategy but as a multidimensional construct capable of building long-term customer relationships. This study attempts to address this gap by investigating the mediating role of brand trust and brand affect in the relationship between ethical branding and brand loyalty.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between ethical branding and long-term brand loyalty. The study aims to understand how ethical branding practices influence consumers' attitudes, emotions, and behavioural commitment toward a brand.



More specifically, the study seeks to analyse the mediating role of brand trust and brand affect in strengthening the relationship between ethical branding and brand loyalty. It also aims to explore how consumers emotionally connect with ethical brands and how this emotional and psychological attachment contributes to sustained loyalty over time.

Additionally, the study intends to provide an integrated analytical framework that combines ethical branding, brand trust, brand affect, and consumer-brand identification in order to better explain consumer loyalty formation. Through this research, the study aims to contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical business strategies related to ethical branding and customer relationship management.

Significance of the Study

This study holds both academic and practical significance. From an academic perspective, the research contributes to the growing body of literature on ethical branding, consumer behaviour, and relationship marketing. It expands existing knowledge by integrating ethical branding with the mediating constructs of brand trust and brand affect to explain long-term brand loyalty. The study also broadens the understanding of how emotional and psychological factors influence consumer-brand relationships in ethically driven markets.

The research is significant because it provides a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which ethical branding creates loyal consumers. By examining the mediating role of trust and affect, the study moves beyond traditional transactional approaches and highlights the importance of emotional attachment and relational commitment in consumer behaviour. The inclusion of consumer-brand identification further strengthens the conceptual framework by explaining how shared values between consumers and brands contribute to loyalty development.

From a managerial perspective, the findings of this study can help organisations and brand managers design more effective branding strategies. The study emphasises that ethical branding should not be treated merely as a promotional tool or temporary marketing tactic. Instead, companies should genuinely integrate ethical values into their organisational culture, communication, operations, and stakeholder relationships. Businesses that consistently demonstrate ethical behaviour are more likely to gain consumer trust, create positive emotional experiences, and foster long-term loyalty.

In today's highly competitive and value-conscious market environment, maintaining customer loyalty has become increasingly challenging. Ethical branding can serve as a strategic advantage that differentiates a brand from competitors and enhances its reputation. The study can therefore assist marketers, policymakers, and business organisations in understanding the importance of ethical practices in achieving sustainable competitive advantage and long-term business success.

Literature Review

Tanveer et al. (2021) examined the role of ethical marketing in creating sustainable consumer-brand relationships and brand loyalty. Their study showed that ethical marketing practices support product sustainability and customer relationship sustainability, which then influence loyalty. Using data from 1,500 customers and structural equation modelling, they found that ethical marketing has a positive impact on both customer relationships and loyalty. Their work supports the view that ethical behaviour can strengthen long-term brand attachment.



brand loyalty. They emphasised the mediating role of brand trust and brand affect. Based on data from 582 respondents, their findings showed that sustainable marketing increases trust, which then leads to emotional attachment and loyalty. Their study is important because it explains that loyalty is not created only through rational satisfaction but also through emotional and trust-based mechanisms.

Fatma and Rahman (2017) explored how consumer-perceived ethicality influences hotel brand loyalty through brand identification, affective commitment, and trust. Their study found that when consumers perceive a hotel brand as ethical, they are more likely to identify with it and develop trust and emotional commitment. This identification ultimately helps create brand loyalty. Their work is highly relevant to the present study because it connects ethical behaviour with loyalty through relational variables rather than only direct effects.

Shukla et al. (2025) discussed how transparency and ethical marketing influence consumer loyalty toward digital brands. Their article highlighted that in digital markets, consumers value honesty, responsible data usage, and genuine storytelling. Based on 200 respondents, the study concluded that transparency and ethical communication improve trust and brand authenticity. This paper is useful because it shows how ethical branding matters even more in digital environments where consumer choice is wide and switching costs are low.

Zhu (2024) examined ethical marketing behaviour in software companies and its influence on consumer-brand relationship quality, perceived product quality, and brand loyalty. Using data from 352 respondents, the study found that ethical marketing improves relationship quality and perceived product quality, which strengthens loyalty. The findings show that ethical behaviour affects not only emotional responses but also consumer judgments about quality and value. This strengthens the argument that ethics has strategic importance in brand building.

Garanti (2019) examined the impact of ethical brand perceptions on emotional brand attachment and brand loyalty among 400 international students in Northern Cyprus using PLS-SEM analysis. The study found that consumers who perceive a brand as ethical develop stronger emotional attachment and greater brand loyalty. Emotional attachment also mediated the relationship between ethical brand perceptions and loyalty. This study is relevant because it highlights the role of emotional attachment in strengthening ethical branding and brand loyalty.

Reji, Moulya, and Rajeswari (2025) reviewed the role of ethical marketing and artificial intelligence in building consumer trust and loyalty. The study emphasised that ethical marketing practices such as honesty, fairness, transparency, and responsible data usage are essential for strengthening consumer trust in the digital era. The paper also discussed how AI-driven marketing strategies improve personalisation and efficiency, but simultaneously create ethical concerns related to privacy and transparency. The authors concluded that integrating ethical marketing principles with AI technologies can enhance brand image, customer satisfaction, and long-term loyalty. This review is relevant to the current study because it highlights the increasing importance of ethical branding in technology-driven and digital marketing environments.

Budi Riharjo, Efendi, Kurnia, and Respatia (2025) analysed the relationship between perceived firm ethicality and brand loyalty through the mediating roles of corporate social responsibility (CSR), green brand



innovativeness (GBI), and green marketing (GM). The study collected data from consumers in major malls located in Jakarta and Surabaya, Indonesia. The findings confirmed that perceived firm ethicality significantly improves brand loyalty through CSR, green innovativeness, and green marketing strategies. The research further explained that ethicality strengthens emotional attachment and trust toward brands, which ultimately increases loyalty. This study contributes to the present research by showing that ethicality-driven strategies play a crucial role in strengthening consumer-brand relationships and long-term commitment.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research approach and analyses secondary data as part of its methodology. Its primary goal was to use SPSS to study whether brand loyalty is different between two groups. An independent-samples t-test is used to conduct the study, which is appropriate when there are two separate groups and one continuous dependent variable. The dependent variable was the brand loyalty score, and the grouping variable separated respondents into two groups.

In SPSS 16, the information was entered in numerical format and arranged in variable view with distinct labels. The group variable was coded as 1 and 2, respectively, indicating the Ethical and Non-Ethical groups. The brand loyalty scores were treated as scale data as they are measurable values. Descriptive statistics and Levene's test for equality of variances were used to examine the data before the t-test. The assumption of equal variances is tested by Levene's method, where a significance value above 0.05 indicates that the row of equal variances should be used for interpretation.

COMPONENT	DESCRIPTION
SOFTWARE	SPSS Version 16
TEST TYPE	Independent-Samples T-Test
SAMPLE SIZE	10 Respondents (Secondary Dummy Data)
GROUPING VARIABLE	Ethical Group (1=Yes, 2=No)
DEPENDENT VARIABLE	Brand Loyalty Score

Data Analysis

The analytical phase of this research involves a systematic evaluation of secondary data using SPSS 16 to determine the statistical significance of ethical branding on consumer loyalty. The primary statistical procedure employed is the Independent-Samples T-Test, which is designed to compare the mean scores of two distinct groups—the "Ethical Group" and the "Non-Ethical Group"—relative to the continuous dependent variable, "Brand Loyalty Score".

The initial stage of the analysis required a formal configuration of the dataset within the SPSS environment. In the Variable View, the independent grouping variable was defined with binary numerical codes: '1' for the Ethical perception and '2' for the Non-Ethical perception. The dependent variable, Brand Loyalty Score, was categorised as a scale measure to allow for the calculation of means, variances, and standard deviations. This structural preparation is a prerequisite for ensuring the mathematical accuracy of the subsequent t-test.



A foundational requirement of the Independent-Samples T-Test is the assessment of the assumption of homogeneity of variance, which is evaluated through Levene's Test for Equality of Variances. This test assesses whether the spread of data points is statistically similar across both groups. The output generated an F-value of 3.191 with a significance (Sig.) value of 0.112. Since the significance value exceeds the standard alpha threshold of 0.05, the null hypothesis for Levene's test is not rejected, confirming that variances are equal. Consequently, the analysis proceeds by reporting the values from the "Equal variances assumed" row.

The core results of the t-test reveal a t-statistic of 0.271 with 8 degrees of freedom (df).

The Sig. (2-tailed) value, or p-value, is recorded at 0.793. Given that this p-value is substantially higher than 0.05, the findings are classified as statistically non-significant. This indicates that there is no empirical basis to conclude that the mean brand loyalty scores of the Ethical Group and the Non-Ethical Group are different in the population from which this sample was drawn.

The descriptive statistics further elucidate this lack of divergence. The Ethical Group (N=5) produced a mean loyalty score of 4.440, whereas the Non-Ethical Group (N=5) produced a mean of 4.360. The resulting Mean Difference of 0.0800 is mathematically negligible when considered alongside a Standard Error Difference of 0.2953. The magnitude of the error relative to the difference suggests that the observed variation is likely a product of sampling fluctuation rather than a systematic effect of the independent variable.

This conclusion is reinforced by the 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference, which spans from -0.6010 to 0.7610. In statistical inference, an interval that encompasses zero indicates that the null hypothesis—stating that the true difference is zero—cannot be rejected.

Therefore, the observed difference is considered statistically unreliable.

While the hypothesis regarding the impact of ethical branding was not supported by this specific dummy dataset, these results remain academically relevant. The insignificance suggests that the grouping variable does not account for a meaningful proportion of the variance in loyalty scores within this sample. These findings highlight the potential complexity of the relationship between ethics and loyalty, suggesting that other factors such as brand trust or consumer-brand identification may be necessary to produce a significant effect. By adhering to the precise outputs of SPSS 16, this analysis provides a rigorous and transparent account of the data, establishing that the perceived ethicality of a brand did not statistically alter loyalty outcomes in this instance.

T-Test (SPSS Outcome) Group Statistics

	ETHICAL GROUP (1=YES, 2=NO)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
BRAND LOYALTY SCORE	ETHICAL	5	4.440	.5857	.2619
	NON	5	4.360	.3050	.1364



Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
BRAND LOYALTY SCORE	Equal variances assumed	3.191	.112	.271	8	.793	.0800	.2953	-.6010	.7610
	Equal variances not assumed			.271	6.021	.796	.0800	.2953	-.6420	.8020

Findings

The findings of the study indicate that the difference in brand loyalty between the two groups is not statistically significant. The Levene's test result confirmed that the variance assumption was satisfied, so the equal variances assumption was used. The t-test result showed a very small mean difference of 0.0800, which is not enough to establish a meaningful difference between the groups. Since the p-value was 0.793, which is much higher than 0.05, the result is not significant.

This means that the current data do not support the claim that one group has higher brand loyalty than the other. The confidence interval also included zero, which further confirms that the difference is weak and unreliable. Therefore, the study shows that the sample does not provide strong statistical evidence for a difference in brand loyalty across the two groups. The result should be reported as a non-significant finding rather than as a positive effect.

The finding is still useful because it shows the real outcome of the data analysis. In research, even non-significant results help improve understanding of the issue. They suggest that more careful data collection, larger sample sizes, or stronger variable separation may be needed in future studies. In the present case, the data do not prove a major difference, but the theoretical relevance of ethical branding remains important.

Suggestions

Based on the findings, the first suggestion is that future studies should use a larger sample size. A larger sample can help produce more stable results and improve the chance of detecting a real difference if one exists. With only a small number of cases, the result may not reflect the actual relationship clearly. A bigger dataset would make the analysis more dependable.

The second suggestion is that the group differences in the data should be made more distinct if the purpose is to test the effect of ethical branding on brand loyalty. If both groups are too similar, the statistical test may not show a meaningful difference. For future SPSS work, the values assigned to the ethical and non-ethical groups should be more clearly separated. This will help the t-test produce a clearer outcome.



The third suggestion is that the study can be improved by including more variables, such as brand trust, brand affect, and consumer-brand identification. These variables can help explain the relationship between ethical branding and loyalty in a more complete way. Instead of comparing only two groups, the researcher can also use correlation or regression analysis to examine how one variable influences another. This would make the paper stronger academically.

The fourth suggestion is that future research should combine quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative analysis shows whether differences exist, while interviews or open-ended questions can explain why those differences occur. This can provide deeper insight into how consumers view ethical branding and why they become loyal to certain brands. It can also help in understanding emotional and trust-based factors more clearly.

The final suggestion is that brands should not depend only on promotional messages about ethics. They should practice ethical behaviour in pricing, communication, customer service, and product delivery. Consumers are more likely to trust brands that show consistency in action. Therefore, ethical branding must be genuine and visible across all touchpoints.

Conclusion

Through the use of an independent-samples t-test in SPSS, the effects of ethical branding on brand loyalty were examined. The study found that even though there was a small mean difference between the groups, it wasn't statistically significant. The Levene's test yielded similar results, but the t-test revealed a p-value of 0.793, which is higher than 0.05. Thus, the study does not offer substantial proof that the two groups exhibit distinct levels of brand loyalty.

The outcome is of academic importance as it demonstrates that ethical branding cannot automatically lead to loyalty. " The relationship may be influenced by various factors, including trust, impact, identification, product quality, and user experience. Although there was no discernible difference in the current sample, ethical branding remains a fundamental aspect of modern marketing. Consumers still value transparency, honesty, and responsibility. Ultimately, the concept of ethical branding remains robust, but it requires stronger empirical evidence and more comprehensive analysis. Currently, the study presents a statistical approach that is both uncomplicated and accessible, comparable to the SPSS output. The article can serve as a starting point for completing supplementary research papers and can be improved in the future by using more advanced methods and larger samples.

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