

SUSTAINABLE MARKETING AND BRAND PURPOSE: EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS OF ENVIRONMENTALLY CONSCIOUS CONSUMERS TOWARD PURCHASE INTENTION IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

The increasing awareness of environmental issues has encouraged companies to adopt sustainable marketing and purpose-driven branding to attract environmentally conscious consumers. This study aims to explore how consumers in Indonesia interpret sustainable marketing and brand purpose in shaping their purchase intention. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed involving 15–20 participants selected through purposive sampling based on their experience with eco-friendly products and sustainability-related issues. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that consumers perceive sustainable marketing and brand purpose as representations of corporate ethics, environmental responsibility, and brand authenticity. Five major themes emerged: sustainability as moral responsibility, skepticism toward greenwashing, emotional connection through brand purpose, authenticity and consumer trust, and sustainability-driven purchase intention. Among these themes, authenticity was identified as the most influential factor affecting consumer trust and purchasing decisions. Consumers showed stronger purchase intention toward brands perceived as transparent, consistent, and genuinely committed to sustainability values. This study contributes to sustainable marketing and ethical consumption literature by providing interpretive insights into consumers' perceptions and experiences within sustainability-oriented markets.

Keywords: Sustainable Marketing, Brand Purpose, Purchase Intention, Green Consumer, Ethical Consumption

INTRODUCTION

The growing global concern regarding environmental degradation, climate change, and unsustainable consumption patterns has significantly transformed consumer expectations toward business practices and corporate responsibility. Contemporary consumers increasingly expect companies to move beyond profit-oriented strategies and demonstrate genuine commitments to sustainability, ethical responsibility, and social value creation. This transformation has accelerated the emergence of sustainable marketing as a strategic orientation that integrates environmental, social, and economic considerations into marketing activities and brand communication (Sharma & Kaur, 2024). Sustainable marketing is therefore no longer perceived merely as a corporate trend but rather as a strategic necessity for organizations seeking legitimacy, consumer trust, and long-term competitiveness in sustainability-conscious markets.

Alongside the rise of sustainable marketing, the concept of brand purpose has also gained substantial attention within contemporary marketing scholarship and practice. Brand purpose refers to a brand's broader reason for existence beyond economic profit, particularly its commitment to addressing societal, environmental, or ethical concerns. Purpose-driven brands are often perceived as more authentic, trustworthy, and emotionally meaningful because they align corporate values with consumers' personal beliefs and moral expectations. Recent studies indicate that consumers increasingly evaluate brands not only based on product quality and price but also based on whether companies demonstrate social responsibility, environmental concern, and ethical consistency in their operations and communications (Zhang et al., 2024).

In the context of environmentally conscious consumers, sustainable marketing and brand purpose are closely associated with the formation of purchase intention. Green consumers tend to prioritize brands that reflect sustainability values and contribute positively to environmental protection. Previous research has demonstrated that green marketing practices, environmental awareness, and sustainability-oriented communication positively influence green purchase intention (Mulya & Kusumawardhani, 2023; Risyafani et al., 2024). Furthermore, sustainable consumption consciousness has been found to significantly shape consumers' intentions to purchase environmentally friendly products (Fernandes et al., 2024).

However, consumer responses toward sustainability-oriented branding are often complex and ambivalent. While some consumers perceive sustainable marketing as a reflection of corporate authenticity and ethical commitment, others remain skeptical and interpret such practices as greenwashing or symbolic marketing tactics intended primarily to improve corporate image. This skepticism has intensified in contemporary digital environments where sustainability narratives are continuously scrutinized by consumers and online communities. Recent discussions within sustainability communication literature emphasize that consumers increasingly demand transparency, authenticity, and evidence-based sustainability claims from brands (Vogue Business, 2024). Consequently, consumers' interpretations of sustainability communication are socially constructed and deeply influenced by personal experiences, environmental values, emotional engagement, and trust toward brands.

Although previous studies have extensively examined green marketing, sustainable consumption, and purchase intention using quantitative approaches, limited studies have explored how environmentally conscious consumers subjectively interpret sustainable marketing and brand purpose within the context of their purchasing decisions, particularly in emerging economies such as Indonesia. Existing studies predominantly focus on causal relationships among variables, statistical effects, or behavioral prediction models, thereby offering limited understanding regarding the lived experiences and emotional meanings underlying green purchase intention. This limitation indicates the need for interpretive and qualitative inquiry capable of uncovering how consumers construct authenticity, trust, and emotional attachment toward sustainability-oriented brands.

Indonesia represents a particularly relevant context for examining this phenomenon due to the rapid growth of environmentally aware consumers, expanding digital sustainability discourse, and increasing public attention toward ethical consumption. The growing popularity of eco-friendly products, sustainable fashion, environmentally responsible businesses, and social-impact brands demonstrates a shifting consumer landscape in which sustainability values increasingly influence purchasing behavior. Moreover, younger consumers and digital communities are becoming increasingly active in evaluating corporate sustainability practices and brand authenticity through social media interactions and online consumption discourse. Nevertheless, the increasing visibility of sustainability campaigns has simultaneously heightened consumer skepticism toward the credibility of corporate sustainability claims.

This study therefore seeks to explore how environmentally conscious consumers in Indonesia interpret sustainable marketing and brand purpose in shaping their purchase intention. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research aims to understand consumers' lived experiences, subjective meanings, and emotional perceptions regarding sustainability-oriented branding practices. By focusing on consumers' interpretations rather than merely measuring behavioral outcomes, this study contributes to the broader literature on sustainable marketing, ethical consumption, and consumer-brand relationships. Furthermore, the study offers contextual insights into how sustainability narratives and purpose-driven branding operate within emerging markets characterized by dynamic digital communication and evolving environmental awareness.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically by enriching the discourse on sustainable marketing, brand authenticity, and ethical consumption from an interpretive consumer perspective. Practically, the study may assist companies in designing sustainability communication strategies and brand purpose initiatives that are perceived as authentic, credible, and emotionally resonant among environmentally conscious consumers.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using phenomenological design to explore how environmentally conscious consumers interpret sustainable marketing and brand purpose in shaping their purchase intention. Phenomenology was considered appropriate because it enables deeper understanding of consumers' lived experiences, subjective meanings, and emotional perceptions regarding sustainability-oriented brands (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The study involved 15–20 environmentally conscious consumers in Indonesia who had experience purchasing eco-friendly or sustainability-oriented products and were familiar with sustainability-related issues. Participants were also active users of digital media where sustainability campaigns and brand communication are frequently encountered.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted either face-to-face or online via digital platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet. The interviews explored participants' perceptions regarding sustainable marketing practices, brand purpose, environmental awareness, greenwashing, trust toward sustainable brands, and purchase intention. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent before being transcribed verbatim. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, which involved data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes related to sustainability perception, brand authenticity, emotional engagement, and ethical consumption behavior.

To ensure trustworthiness, this study applied credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking, iterative interpretation, and data triangulation through sustainability-related digital content observation were also conducted to strengthen the validity of findings. All participants voluntarily participated in the study and provided informed consent prior to the interviews. Participant identities and personal information were anonymized to maintain confidentiality throughout the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sustainability as Moral Responsibility

Most participants perceived sustainable consumption as part of personal moral responsibility toward environmental preservation. Participants associated purchasing environmentally friendly products with ethical behavior, social awareness, and responsible citizenship. Sustainable brands were often interpreted as brands that share similar environmental values with consumers, thereby strengthening emotional and psychological attachment. Several participants explained that choosing eco-friendly products made them feel more responsible and socially conscious. This finding supports previous studies suggesting that green consumption is increasingly linked to moral identity and ethical self-expression rather than merely functional product evaluation (White et al., 2019). Consumers therefore viewed sustainable marketing positively when sustainability messages aligned with their personal environmental values and everyday consumption practices. The findings also indicate that younger consumers tend to integrate sustainability values into their lifestyle and social identity. Sustainability-oriented consumption was frequently associated with awareness, education, and

modern responsible living. This demonstrates that sustainable marketing functions not only as commercial communication but also as a cultural and symbolic discourse influencing consumer identity formation.

Skepticism toward Greenwashing

Despite generally positive attitudes toward sustainability-oriented brands, participants also expressed considerable skepticism toward corporate sustainability claims. Many participants believed that some companies use sustainability narratives merely as marketing tools without demonstrating genuine environmental commitment. Terms such as “fake sustainability,” “image-building,” and “marketing gimmick” frequently appeared during the interviews. Participants emphasized that excessive sustainability claims without transparent evidence often reduce trust toward brands. Consumers increasingly evaluate whether sustainability communication is supported by real corporate practices, including environmentally friendly packaging, ethical sourcing, waste reduction initiatives, and transparency regarding production processes. This finding is consistent with recent literature suggesting that growing public awareness has intensified consumer sensitivity toward greenwashing practices and symbolic sustainability communication (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020).

The rise of digital media further strengthens consumer skepticism because sustainability claims can easily be scrutinized, discussed, and criticized through online platforms. Participants frequently mentioned social media discussions, influencer reviews, and online communities as important sources for evaluating brand credibility. Consequently, sustainable marketing alone was considered insufficient unless accompanied by authenticity and observable environmental action.

Another important aspect emerging from the findings is the influential role of digital media ecosystems in shaping consumers’ sustainability perceptions and purchase evaluations. Participants frequently described how social media platforms, online reviews, environmental influencers, and digital communities significantly affect their interpretations of brand authenticity and sustainability credibility. Consumers no longer rely solely on corporate advertising or official brand communication when evaluating sustainability claims. Instead, they actively compare information from multiple digital sources, including user-generated content, independent reviews, online discussions, and sustainability-related campaigns circulating through social media platforms. This indicates that sustainability communication has become increasingly participatory and socially negotiated within digital environments.

Consumers are not passive recipients of marketing messages but rather active interpreters who collectively construct judgments regarding whether brands genuinely practice sustainability or merely employ sustainability rhetoric for reputational purposes. Recent studies similarly suggest that digital transparency and peer-generated communication increasingly shape sustainable consumption behavior because consumers perceive peer discussions as more credible than traditional advertising (Dwivedi et al., 2023). Consequently, brands operating within sustainability-oriented markets must recognize that authenticity is continuously evaluated within highly interactive digital spaces where corporate narratives can easily be challenged, validated, or amplified by online communities.

Emotional Connection through Brand Purpose

Another important finding concerns the role of brand purpose in creating emotional attachment between consumers and brands. Participants stated that they were more attracted to brands that communicate meaningful social or environmental missions beyond commercial interests. Brands perceived as having genuine social purpose were considered more inspiring, relatable, and emotionally engaging.

Participants often interpreted brand purpose as evidence that a company genuinely cares about broader societal and environmental issues. Emotional responses such as admiration, respect, and personal alignment frequently emerged when participants discussed brands perceived as purpose-driven. This finding supports previous research indicating that purpose-driven branding enhances emotional engagement and strengthens consumer-brand relationships (Kotler et al., 2022). Interestingly, participants also emphasized that emotional

connection is highly dependent on perceived consistency between brand narratives and corporate behavior. Consumers tended to reject brands whose social campaigns appeared inconsistent with their operational practices. Therefore, brand purpose was interpreted not merely as communication content but as a reflection of organizational authenticity and ethical integrity.

Authenticity and Consumer Trust

Authenticity emerged as one of the most dominant themes influencing consumer perceptions and purchase intention. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of honesty, transparency, and consistency in sustainability-oriented branding. Consumers were more likely to trust brands that provide clear information regarding environmental initiatives, sustainable materials, ethical sourcing, and measurable sustainability commitments. Participants perceived authenticity through several indicators, including transparent communication, realistic sustainability claims, long-term environmental commitment, and consistency between online campaigns and actual business practices. Brands that openly acknowledge sustainability limitations while continuously demonstrating improvement were often perceived as more trustworthy than brands making exaggerated environmental claims.

This finding demonstrates that consumer trust is strongly shaped by perceived authenticity rather than sustainability messaging alone. In line with Authenticity Theory, consumers actively interpret whether brand communication reflects genuine ethical commitment or symbolic reputation management. Trust therefore becomes a critical mechanism through which sustainable marketing and brand purpose influence consumer behavior. Furthermore, participants suggested that authenticity enhances emotional security in purchasing decisions. Consumers felt more confident supporting brands that align with their environmental values and demonstrate credible sustainability practices. This indicates that authenticity plays both cognitive and emotional roles within sustainable consumption experiences.

The findings also reveal that younger consumers demonstrate stronger emotional sensitivity toward sustainability narratives compared to previous generations. Participants, particularly those belonging to digitally connected younger demographic groups, tended to associate sustainable consumption with lifestyle expression, personal values, and social identity construction. Sustainability-oriented purchasing behavior was frequently interpreted not only as an economic decision but also as a symbolic statement reflecting environmental awareness, ethical consciousness, and modern responsible living. This phenomenon reflects the increasing integration of sustainability values into contemporary youth culture and digital identity practices.

Younger consumers often seek brands that resonate with their personal beliefs and provide opportunities for self-expression through ethical consumption. In this context, sustainable brands function as symbolic resources that allow consumers to communicate moral positioning and social belonging within environmentally conscious communities. Previous research similarly emphasizes that younger generations, particularly Gen Z and millennials, are more likely to support brands perceived as socially responsible, environmentally transparent, and purpose-driven because such brands contribute to consumers' identity affirmation and emotional engagement (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). Therefore, sustainability-oriented branding strategies should not merely focus on environmental messaging but also consider how sustainability values can meaningfully connect with consumers' identities, aspirations, and emotional experiences.

Sustainability-Driven Purchase Intention

The findings reveal that sustainable marketing and brand purpose significantly contribute to participants' purchase intention when consumers perceive sustainability communication as authentic and value-driven. Participants expressed stronger willingness to purchase products from brands that demonstrate clear environmental responsibility, social commitment, and ethical consistency. However, purchase intention was not influenced solely by environmental concern. Participants explained that emotional connection, trust, brand credibility, and perceived authenticity were equally important in shaping purchasing decisions.

Consumers tended to support brands that allowed them to express personal values and environmental identity through consumption behavior.

Interestingly, several participants admitted that they occasionally experience conflict between sustainability values and practical considerations such as price, accessibility, and product convenience. This finding reflects the persistence of the attitude–behavior gap frequently discussed in sustainable consumption literature, where positive environmental attitudes do not always translate into actual purchasing behavior (ElHaffar et al., 2024). Nevertheless, participants generally indicated that authentic sustainable marketing and meaningful brand purpose positively strengthen their motivation to support environmentally responsible brands. Sustainable consumption was therefore interpreted not merely as economic behavior but also as an emotional, symbolic, and ethical practice connected to personal identity and moral responsibility.

The findings of this study demonstrate that environmentally conscious consumers in Indonesia interpret sustainable marketing and brand purpose as multidimensional phenomena involving moral values, emotional attachment, authenticity evaluation, and ethical identity construction. This study extends previous quantitative research by providing deeper interpretive understanding regarding how consumers subjectively construct meanings surrounding sustainability-oriented brands.

First, the findings support Consumer Culture Theory by showing that sustainable consumption is closely associated with symbolic identity and moral self-expression. Consumers do not merely purchase environmentally friendly products for functional reasons but also to reinforce personal values and social identity. Sustainable brands therefore operate as symbolic resources through which consumers express environmental awareness and responsible citizenship.

Second, this study highlights the central role of authenticity in sustainability-oriented branding. Consumers increasingly reject superficial sustainability narratives and demand consistency between brand communication and actual environmental practices. This finding reinforces previous studies emphasizing that greenwashing skepticism significantly influences consumer trust and sustainable purchase behavior.

Third, the study demonstrates that brand purpose contributes to purchase intention through emotional and moral engagement rather than purely rational evaluation. Purpose-driven brands were perceived as more meaningful and trustworthy because they align with consumers' ethical expectations and environmental values. Consequently, sustainable marketing effectiveness depends heavily on the extent to which consumers perceive brand purpose as authentic, transparent, and socially relevant.

From a managerial perspective, the findings imply that companies should approach sustainable marketing as a long-term organizational commitment rather than a short-term promotional strategy. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of observable corporate action, transparency, and consistency between sustainability narratives and actual business practices. This suggests that companies seeking to strengthen consumer trust should integrate sustainability principles into core operational activities, including sourcing decisions, production systems, packaging practices, and stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, sustainability communication should prioritize honesty and realistic representation instead of exaggerated environmental claims that may trigger consumer skepticism.

The findings also indicate that emotionally meaningful brand purpose can strengthen consumer attachment when supported by authentic organizational behavior. Therefore, companies should carefully align brand purpose initiatives with corporate values, operational realities, and measurable sustainability outcomes. In highly connected digital environments, consumers increasingly expect brands to demonstrate accountability and responsiveness regarding environmental and social issues. As a result, sustainable marketing effectiveness depends not only on persuasive communication but also on organizations' ability to continuously demonstrate ethical responsibility, transparency, and credible environmental commitment across both online and offline interactions.

Overall, the findings suggest that sustainability-oriented marketing strategies should move beyond symbolic communication and prioritize authenticity, transparency, and long-term environmental commitment. In emerging markets such as Indonesia, where environmental awareness and digital sustainability discourse continue to grow, consumers increasingly expect brands to demonstrate genuine ethical responsibility rather than merely adopting sustainability rhetoric for commercial advantage.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how environmentally conscious consumers in Indonesia interpret sustainable marketing and brand purpose in shaping their purchase intention. The findings reveal that consumers perceive sustainable marketing not merely as promotional communication but as a reflection of corporate ethics, environmental responsibility, and organizational authenticity. Similarly, brand purpose was interpreted as an important factor influencing emotional attachment, consumer trust, and ethical alignment between consumers and brands. The study identified several major themes, including sustainability as moral responsibility, skepticism toward greenwashing, emotional connection through brand purpose, authenticity and consumer trust, and sustainability-driven purchase intention. Among these themes, authenticity emerged as the most critical factor influencing consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. Consumers increasingly expect brands to demonstrate transparent, consistent, and credible sustainability practices rather than relying solely on symbolic environmental communication.

The findings also indicate that green purchase intention is shaped not only by environmental awareness but also by emotional engagement, moral identity, and perceived brand authenticity. Consumers tend to support brands that align with their personal values and demonstrate genuine commitment toward environmental and social issues. However, the persistence of skepticism toward greenwashing suggests that sustainability communication alone is insufficient without observable corporate action and ethical consistency.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on sustainable marketing, brand purpose, and ethical consumption by providing an interpretive understanding of consumers' lived experiences and symbolic meaning construction within sustainability-oriented markets. Practically, the findings suggest that companies should prioritize authentic sustainability initiatives, transparent communication, and meaningful brand purpose to strengthen consumer trust and purchase intention among environmentally conscious consumers. Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its relatively small qualitative sample and specific contextual focus on Indonesian consumers. Future research may expand the investigation by incorporating cross-cultural perspectives, comparative consumer segments, or mixed-method approaches to further examine the relationship between sustainable marketing, authenticity, and sustainable consumption behavior.

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